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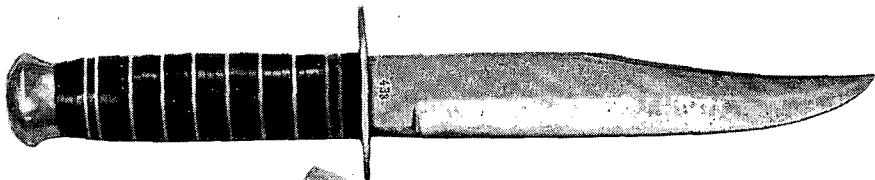
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Lois Adams

We surrender. For years, we've tried to keep vampires—and werewolves and the like—out of the pages of AHMM. We admit that sometimes we like stories of that kind, but we rarely feel they belong in this magazine. But then, a few months ago, Alan Ryan sent us "Kiss the Vampire Goodbye," and we found ourselves first amused, then impressed, and finally we just threw our garlic necklaces away. In the matter of vampires, at least, we have seen the darkness.

But vampires aren't the only creatures stalking our pages this month—there is at least one tiger weaving through the underbrush. We see a brief menacing gleam in Ruthven Earle-Patrick's "Hunting the Tiger's Eye," which, we should note, is the author's first

published story. Then we catch a glimpse of tiger stripes on a plush-covered chair in Barbara Ninde Byfield's "The Finishing Touch." Those of you who remember her illustrated "Cast of Characters" (August, 1983) will welcome her witty drawing for this new story.

The tiger comes out into the open at last... or does he? ... in the Mystery Classic, Frank Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger?" One of the real surprises of this story, after all these years, is that it has a sequel. "The Discourager of Hesitancy" is a tantalizing fable, especially since Stockton hints that *somewhere* in the second story is the secret of the first, of who really was behind that door, the lady or the tiger?

Lois Adams is the Managing Editor of AHMM.

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FICTION

FARLEY'S GHOST

by John Soennichsen



Illustration by Richard Crist

Farley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. Higgins, his junior partner in life, had done the deed, removed the evidence, and laid the foundation for several wonderful years of profitable business, free from the interference of his often exasperating, always meddling senior partner.

"You'll not get far in business that way, Higgins," Farley would say at least four times each day, generally followed by "That's why I'm the senior partner and you're the junior." Another penchant of Higgins' late partner had been to insert himself, at just the proper moment, into the affairs of his younger associate and cause them to go awry. Then Farley would sit back in his huge leather chair, pipe in hand, and shake his head sadly at the distressful state of disarray into which Higgins had allowed his business affairs to fall.

But, now, this was a thing of the past. Only one slight detail remained—to dispose of Farley's body, which currently occupied the floorspace in the nursery beneath little Jimmy's crib.

Jimmy and his mommy were away at Grandma's so there was, after all, nothing significantly unsavory about the current location of the corpse.

It was convenient, unobtrusive, and the death had not involved the spilling of blood. Higgins, after all, was a neat man; hence his present concern as to the appropriate method for the disposal of his partner's body.

He sat at the kitchen table, a half-eaten ham sandwich and an empty wine glass in front of him. As he pondered the situation, occasionally raising a hand to scratch the top of his small, balding head, his mind slipped back and forth between the fantasies of his prosperous life ahead and the nagging realities of this one last detail remaining to be dealt with. Higgins absentmindedly lifted the empty wine glass to his lips, then put it back with a bang on the table.

"What a bother!" he exclaimed aloud.

Little had he dreamed the murder would be the easy part, and the disposition of the corpse such an annoying task.

But at last, resigned to his obligations regarding the already stiffening body, Higgins cleared the kitchen table, placing the dirty plate in the dishwasher and carefully wiping the crumbs from the table with a damp sponge. Then he turned off the light and went out the back door, locking it behind him.

At the hardware store, which was just about to close for the evening, Mr. Culpepper attempted to find the right item for Higgins.

"If you could just tell me what sort of objects you'll be keeping in this container," he was saying, all the time watching the large wall clock, "maybe I could help you."

"I'll know what will work when I see it," replied Higgins. He weaved in and out of the aisles, followed closely by Culpepper, but seemed unable to come upon anything suitable.

"Wouldn't a nice garbage can work?" Culpepper asked in a plaintive voice. "Nearly anything can go in a garbage can."

"No," answered Higgins, "not flexible enough, and the lid might fall off when . . . er, if I were to drop it. What I need is some sort of bag."

"Ah," said the storekeeper, brightening. "A ten mil trash bag is what you need. Even heavy duty trash won't break these!"

Higgins suppressed a grin at the thought of Farley as "heavy duty trash." Unfortunately, Culpepper's suggestion wouldn't hold water . . . or Farley.

"Something stronger," suggested Higgins, "maybe canvas. Do you have canvas bags?"

Culpepper rolled his eyes. He

would miss dinner tonight, there just wasn't any way around it.

"We don't carry any canvas products," he sighed. "Perhaps if you tried an army surplus store, or a tentmaker."

Higgins' lips twitched with these unforeseen developments. It had all been planned to go so easily, and now he couldn't get past step number one.

Higgins rounded an aisle and found himself in a sporting goods section. "Aha!" he said.

"Yes?" said Culpepper eagerly, dogging Higgins' every step. He peered over the little man's shoulder to see which item had at last caught his attention.

"Yes, this might work very well!" said Higgins.

"A game bag?" said Culpepper. "You want to buy a game bag? Are you an elk hunter, Mr. Higgins?"

Higgins, preoccupied, continued to examine the game bag, running his fingers over the taut mesh surface. "Yes," he said, "this will work perfectly. Will you sell me this?"

"It's not elk season yet, you know," warned Culpepper. "I can't sell you an elk bag, and . . . you wouldn't be considering killing out of season, now would you, Mr. Higgins?"

Higgins pivoted quickly to face the storekeeper. "What was

that?" he asked nervously.

"Shooting an elk," Culpepper replied. "It's out of season until next month."

"Who wants to shoot an elk?" replied Higgins loudly. "I don't even hunt," he added, a bit disgusted at the direction in which the conversation was heading.

"Why . . . of course," replied Culpepper, a bit miffed. "It's just that, well, technically we're closed, and yet you seemed to be in such a hurry to buy this particular item, why I naturally assumed . . ."

"Yes, a natural assumption, of course," said Higgins, somewhat more calmly. "But now that I have found what I need, I may as well get it right now."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Higgins," replied Culpepper. He paused. "Will you be needing a skinning knife as well?"

Even with the largest game bag the store had, the fit was tight, his partner Farley having put on a number of pounds over the last few years. And in Farley's present condition, thought Higgins, his late partner was being no more cooperative than he had been in life.

"I should have put him in the sack first, then killed him," said Higgins, a smirk on his face. He finally tied the drawstring and stood back to admire his work. Farley made

a poor excuse for an elk, but as a corpse, he wasn't bad. As Higgins dragged the body across the living room and out to the garage, the wonderful appropriateness of the words "dead weight" suddenly became clear to him.

The drive to the Gorge Bridge was a lonely one. The night was cold and wet, and the family station wagon shuddered now and then as occasional errant gusts of wind whipped across the highway, striking the car broadside.

Higgins cursed the fact that his wife had taken the sedan to her mother's rather than the wagon. Whereas the body could have been safely concealed in the trunk of the Pontiac, it was now in the back of the station wagon, covered with a blanket, but nevertheless in full view of anyone who might have peered through the back windows. It was with this albeit slight possibility in mind that Higgins had decided to leave little Jimmy's hot wheels toy, a case of dog food, and four Little Golden Books in the back as well, perhaps creating a facade of normality that would negate any suspicion caused by the sight of the large blanket-covered lump beside the other items.

Looking at his watch, Higgins frowned. The extra minutes spent in the hardware store had put him behind schedule, and it was essential that he reach the bridge before the night barge passed under. Once on the other side of the span, he would be safe from the scrutiny of the bridge tender, occupied with raising the center section to allow the barge to pass beneath. Neither the bridge tender nor the barge captain would take notice of the lone car pulling to a stop just past the center span, nor the brief splash of a heavy object hitting the water. The weather was even cooperating—a peal of thunder was music to Higgins' ears as he increased the pressure of his foot on the accelerator. He could still make it if he just kept his speed up.

Ahead of him now, illuminated briefly by a flash of lightning, was the skeleton-like framework of the steel bridge. A mile or more downriver Higgins saw the bright light from the approaching barge flickering steadily through the pouring rain, which fell now in great sheets. Higgins turned the wipers on high. He turned onto the off-ramp for the bridge, which circled around under the highway, to wind briefly through the fir trees lining the river before leading up to the large

steel structure. He parked the car around a bend some hundred yards from the sight of the bridge tender's tiny quarters. From the cramped little booth just off the bridge the operation of the lifting mechanism and the lowering of the warning gates was controlled. Higgins walked around to the back of the car in the pouring rain, and opened the tailgate.

Under the old army blanket, the body in the game bag had grown stiffer, aided perhaps by the icy-cold temperatures on this dark October night. Higgins lifted the blanket momentarily, undid the drawstring, and stared at Farley, who lay in a sort of fetal position, his head twisted so that he faced Higgins. A momentary flash of lightning illuminated the dead man's stark-white face, and Higgins imagined for a single second that that face—a face he had looked at five days a week for over twenty years—had a hysterical smile on it.

In the distance, the barge sounded its horn, alerting the bridge tender to the boat's approach, and the sound snapped Higgins back to reality. Thunder rolled as he quickly spread the blanket over the corpse and closed the tailgate of the wagon. Then Higgins slid back behind the wheel and pulled quickly onto the road, his tires

digging out in the soft soil of the shoulder. In less than a minute he was driving onto the steel grating of the bridge itself—he was home free.

Or so he thought, until a little man ran out onto the bridge from a small, newly built cubicle just beyond the bridge tender's own little booth. He was waving his arms furiously as he rushed in front of the wagon, and Higgins barely managed to slam on the brakes in time to avoid hitting him. He jumped angrily out of his car.

"What are you doing!" Higgins shouted, "Get out of my way!"

The little man walked calmly around to Higgins, pulling a clipboard and a small wooden box out from under his heavy yellow raincoat.

"This here's a toll bridge now, mister. That'll be seventy-five cents." Smiling, the little man wrote the license number of the wagon on the sheet of paper attached to the clipboard, then held the box out under Higgin's nose. "For road improvement come next spring," the man said, grinning again.

"What the . . ." began Higgins, impatiently. He looked out over the edge of the bridge at the approaching barge, then thrust his hand into his pocket. Empty . . . no, he felt a small amount of change, four coins.

Higgins whispered a silent prayer as he pulled out the money, a prayer that the sum of the coins might equal the amount needed to cross the bridge. The little toll taker immediately pulled a flashlight from his raincoat pocket and directed the beam at Higgins' outstretched hand. The two men, heads bent over the coins, silently counted to themselves. Then the little man shook his head as he looked up at Higgins.

"Fifteen cents short, looks like. How 'bout that other pocket."

"That's all there is!" growled Higgins angrily. "Look, I'm really in a hurry. Surely fifteen cents is not going to make or break your road improvement project. This is all I've got."

By now the barge was only a few hundred feet away from the bridge, and the bridge tender was nervously popping his head out of his office, eyeing the two men ahead of him.

"Sorry," the toll collector told Higgins. "I got my job—collect seventy-five cents from each car to cross the bridge."

"This is the most absurd thing I've ever . . . look, how about a check," said Higgins suddenly. "Surely you'll take a check." He again eyed the barge, slowly coming nearer and nearer to the bridge.

"You'll have to cross real quick, mister, or else back that car off the bridge," called the bridge tender loudly. "She's goin' up in a minute."

"Look," said Higgins, "let me write you a check for one dollar. That's twenty-five cents more than the toll. Think what a hero you'll be when you produce extra income for your supervisor."

"You live in Tuckerville?" asked the little man suspiciously.

"What? Why, of course not. I came from the city, and I'm in a hurry to cross that bridge." He fumbled with his checkbook and tried to get his pen to write as he spoke.

"Can't take no out o' town checks," said the toll collector, finally lowering the small box from under Higgins' nose. "You'll have to cash it somewhere and come back later, I guess," he added. There was a note of disappointment in his voice.

"She's goin' up," called the bridge tender.

"I don't believe this," said Higgins, with a frown. He climbed back into the station wagon and backed the car off the bridge as the wooden arms of the warning gate lowered slowly in front of him, their red lights flashing. For an instant, Higgins actually thought of running the barrier and cross-

ing the bridge before it was raised, but he quickly dismissed the notion. The whole idea was to avoid any sort of confrontation, any actions that might arouse suspicions. Now, with his license number having been duly recorded on the toll collector's notepad, Higgins would not be returning to the bridge that night, or any night in the foreseeable future.

He backed the car into a wide spot of the shoulder, made a U-turn, and headed back in the direction from which he had come, fuming all the while at his cursed luck.

As Higgins looked back in his rear view mirror, eyeing the bridge that slowly rose in the direction behind him, he became conscious of another reflection in the mirror. Though dark, and indistinct in the blackness of the stormy night, the image was clearly that of Farley's face, smiling at Higgins as their gazes met. Higgins, disbelieving, stared at the face as he continued to drive.

"You blew it again, Higgins," came the voice of Farley. "A dark, rainy night . . . perfect for disposing of my body and you can't even manage a simple job like that."

"I don't believe in you!" screamed Higgins. "You don't exist! You're dead and wrapped in a game bag!"

He glanced away from the terrifying image long enough to guide the car around a steep curve, then looked quickly back at the mirror. The image of Farely was gone. He had imagined the whole encounter. Higgins shuddered and drove toward home. Not a man for changing ideas, plans, or even his clothes on short notice, he would return home to draw up another plan for another day.

The idea of the city dump came to Higgins out of the blue, actually suggested to him by an ad he watched on television as he sat dressed in his bathrobe, his feet in a pan of hot water, nursing a cold he seemed to have developed.

"The city budget is so tight right now," the young, slickly dressed candidate was saying, "that we can't even afford a full-time caretaker for the city dump." The camera pulled back to show the candidate atop a pile of rubbish that seemed to go on forever. Behind him circled several noisy seagulls and a crow or two. "My leadership," continued the candidate, "will allow for the professional operation of these city services, and . . ."

Higgins switched off the television, sat back on the couch, and stared into space, thinking.

"Of course," he mumbled to himself. "One lone, part-time employee to oversee the whole place. A line of cars wanting to dump their yard debris on a Saturday morning. Who's going to notice just one more vehicle dumping a load?"

He smiled at his cleverness. Why hadn't he thought of it before—instead of a lonely, isolated setting, what better place to dump a body than a crowded, busy spot where the last thing anyone would suspect would be that foul play was being carried out right under their noses?

Higgins smiled and reached for a glass of wine. He looked in the direction of the garage. "We'll take care of you once and for all, in the morning," he said.

The morning dawned clear and cold. The storm of the previous night had blown itself out, but brought in a blast of icy air from the north that froze the fringes of the puddles and silenced the birds lining the telephone wires.

Higgins' breath produced clouds of steam as he pulled open the garage door and looked out at the neighborhood, silent and empty for this time of the morning on a Saturday. For a moment, Higgins paused. Perhaps he was starting too early. After all, his new plan called



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for a crowd of people around him, all involved in their own little tasks and concerns and oblivious to others nearby. But then he pictured the numerous other neighborhoods in the city, each with a lone soul or two beginning to load up a van or pickup truck with garbage, eager to get the distasteful chore over with early enough to reserve the afternoon for football on TV.

No, thought Higgins, on reflection, by the time he got there the city dump would be full of people.

And it was. Surprisingly full. Maybe they'd all seen the ad on television. Maybe a sense of civic pride led the dozens of cars in front of him to use their public dump. Maybe it was National Refuse Day. Whatever the reason, Higgins found himself in a line of at least forty-five cars, all inching their way up the side street leading to the dump. Each car stopped momentarily to pay for the privilege, then turned onto the muddy, rock and garbage strewn road that led down into the dumpyard. Higgins had brought cash this time, as well as a few dozen household items that needed dumping. Might as well make this convincing, he had thought to himself with a grin. After nearly half an hour in the slowly moving line, Higgins at

last eased the wagon forward in front of the rudely-built wooden shack marking the entrance to the dump.

"Tires?" was the single word mouthed in monotone by the toothless old man with a baseball cap. Sitting on a stool in front of a cluttered metal desk, the old man leaned out of the window and gazed at Higgins, who sat calmly in his seat, holding the wheel with one hand.

"I beg your pardon?" Higgins said.

"Got any tires?" the old man repeated, a bit irritated.

"Tires, no," replied Higgins. "How much is it to dump my refuse?"

"How 'bout household trash?" the old man continued. "Got any o' that?"

"How do you define household trash?" Higgins asked, fumbling with the dollar bills in his right hand.

"Old grease cans, food, spoiled meat, that kind of stuff. Anything that'll rot and attract rats. You can't dump that kind of stuff here."

Higgins glanced quickly in the rear view mirror and saw the lump beneath the blanket that was Farley.

"Not a thing of that nature," he replied with a smile.

The toothless old man eyed the station wagon suspiciously, as if he doubted Higgins' word.

Then he looked back at the line of cars behind the wagon and said, "Seven fifty and thirty-eight cents city tax."

Higgins gave the man a twenty dollar bill, eliciting a look of disgust on the old wrinkled face. The man reached down and opened a drawer above his knees, pulling out a cash box which knocked two or three comic books onto the floor in the process. Then he made change for Higgins, counting it back three times to be certain he had figured it correctly.

"To your right and follow the signs," he said again in the monotone voice.

The "signs" were cardboard boxes lining the muddy road, which had been marked in felt pen with arrows. Maybe the politician on television was right, thought Higgins. He found an empty spot next to a beat-up red pickup truck, and carefully backed the wagon to the edge of a gently sloping embankment, as he had seen the other cars do. Then, with a smile, Higgins stepped out of the car to finish the job.

"Say, buddy," came the twangy voice almost immediately. "Think you can help me with this for a minute?"

Higgins slowly turned his head to see a very large and very rotund man high atop the red pickup beside his car. Ac-

tually, the man stood on top of a huge pile of yard debris, broken sheet rock, and miscellaneous scraps of twisted metal, which lay in the bed of the truck. He was struggling with a set of large, rusted bedsprings that had become entangled in some of the metal scraps and wouldn't budge.

"What is it you need?" asked Higgins sharply, a hint of irritation in his voice.

"Well, I figger if maybe the two of us was to push this sucker real hard, she might just slide right off. What do you think?"

"I think you should have arranged things a bit more neatly, by the looks of it," said Higgins, but in a voice so low that the big man could not have heard him.

"How's that?" the big man replied, wiping one gloved hand across his dirty brow while holding the coil springs in an almost vertical position with the other hand. His large belly hung out from beneath the red plaid shirt he wore. It was missing several buttons, and the loose tails flapped in the stiff breeze that blew across the expanse of the dumpyard.

Higgins stared at the big man, pondering what action he should take. He saw the big man's wife, sitting in the front seat of the pickup, equally large

and only slightly less soiled in appearance. She smiled at Higgins with a mouthful of crooked teeth when her eyes met his.

Higgins turned his gaze quickly back to the big man and, with a sigh, said, "Let me see what I can do." He crossed over to the pickup and looked into the bed of the truck, attempting to ascertain the reason for the immovable coil springs.

"Tangled up on somethin' else, I bet," came the voice from above.

"Remarkably astute of you," Higgins replied under his breath. At last he spotted a tangled mass of twisted wires that had effectively tied the coil springs to a large metal pipe of some kind. The pipe, in turn, was partially buried beneath a pile of frozen turf. If the wire could be untangled, thought Higgins, the springs would probably break loose, and he could get back to his own task.

"How's she comin'?" called the big man.

"I think I can loosen it for you, then you can push it free."

"Sounds good, buddy," came the reply as Higgins leaned into the pile of rubbish to reach for the rusty, twisted loops of wire. Somehow, his plan was again going awry, he thought as he struggled to free the bed springs. But at least, after this disa-

greeable job was done, he could get on with the dumping of his own "garbage" and make it home in time for the afternoon TV-movie.

"How do I know when to give this thing a push?" called the big man impatiently. "This sucker's pretty damn heavy!"

"Give it a shove when I say 'Now,'" replied Higgins, who was practically inside the bed of the truck and had nearly worked the wire free.

"Was that now you said?" called the big man again.

"Right," said Higgins crossly, "now!"

The big man proceeded to lean with all his bulk against the set of coiled springs, while, at nearly the same moment, Higgins had managed to pull the end of the wire away from the pipe that kept the springs from moving. He knew immediately what was happening and quickly pushed himself backwards in an attempt to escape from the falling springs. It was to no avail, however, and the springs—along with a pile of flying debris loosed by the falling object—fell atop Higgins, burying him in the bed of the pickup.

"Merciful heavens!" came the voice of the fat woman in the truck. She jumped out of the cab and ran to the back of the vehicle. Only Higgins' legs could

now be seen, hanging out the back beneath a pile of turf, metal scraps, crumbled sheet rock, and the body of the big man, who had fallen forward when the coil springs gave way.

"You went and killed the poor man!" she squealed, and immediately began to pull on Higgins' legs. Meanwhile the big man had stood up. After shaking his head and brushing off his arms, he began to remove some of the heavy debris from the top of Higgins.

The big man's wife continued to grab at Higgins' thighs, tugging and pulling while at the same time nearly crushing Higgins' legs with the pressure of her massive bosom.

At last he was free, though filthy and shaken, and somewhat removed from reality. As Higgins stood there, quaking, the fat woman suddenly reached over and brushed his face off, then whacked Higgins' chest solidly, and stamped her foot on the ground a moment later.

"Cockroach," she said. "The little buggers are everywhere, and hard as the dickens to get rid of!"

Higgins let out a single, ear-piercing scream of frustration, followed by a moment of silence, and another yell. Then he ran for the station wagon and backed away from the scene as fast as he could, nearly hit-

ting another approaching car in the process.

"Say, I was gonna help you dump your stuff now," called the big man after the departing wagon. A man stepped out of the car that had barely avoided the collision, and he too stared at the speeding station wagon as it made its way in a cloud of dust up the hill and out of sight. The fat woman waddled up alongside the man and joined him in staring.

"It was just a cockroach," she said quietly.

Dirty, wet, and with a bruised set of kneecaps, Higgins pulled the car into his driveway and screeched to a stop. He sat behind the wheel trying to regain his composure before getting out of the car to open his garage door. All the way home, he had imagined the sounds of restrained laughter coming from the back of the wagon, and though he knew it was all in his imagination, he couldn't help but imagine that Farley, even in death, was thwarting his plans as he had in life.

A car pulled into the driveway of the house next door, and a crowd of screeching ten-year-old boys burst from the vehicle. Amidst raucous shouting and good-natured jostling, they made their way in a herd to the front door of the house. Pad-

field, the All-American next door neighbor, hopped out of the car after the boys, appearing, as always, as if he had arrived on the scene fresh from starring in a milk commercial for television.

"Higgins," he called, "how goes the battle?"

Higgins reluctantly stepped out of the station wagon, limping slightly as he walked to his garage door. "Just fine," he mumbled, "just fine."

"Looks like you've been working hard."

"Right," replied Higgins weakly. He reached down and began to pull open the garage door.

"We just came from the mountains," Padfield continued in his cheery voice, oblivious to both Higgins' appearance and his less than sociable attitude. "Planned to stay all weekend, but it started to snow. The whole campground cleared out all at once. It's like a ghost town now."

Higgins paused, still holding the garage door handle, the door halfway open. "A ghost town?" he inquired.

"Empty, deserted," Padfield replied. "A little snow is a big inconvenience when you haven't planned for it."

"Of course," said Higgins, letting go of the door handle and standing up again, a distant

look in his eyes. "I can see where that would be true."

Padfield jogged up to his front door to let in the troop of miscellaneous neighborhood kids, and the door soon closed behind them.

"There's no reason why it couldn't work," Higgins was mumbling to himself. "It's as if it were a sign," he added quietly. "Why not!" he concluded at last. He quickly opened the garage door and ran back to the wagon. Then, after backing into the garage, he again closed the door and, using a pair of garden shears, cut open the game bag, laying Farley out freely under the blanket in the back of the wagon. Moments later, Higgins was back on the road, heading towards the highway that would take him up to the popular summertime resort area, Larch Mountain.

"A deserted campground," said Higgins to himself as he drove the winding road up into the mountains from which his neighbor Padfield had recently returned. The clouds hung low over the pine-covered slopes of the foothills, and Higgins could see the snow-laden summits in the distance, confirming what Padfield had told him.

His new plan was even better than the previous two, which had called for Farley to be found and determined to be a victim

of foul play, presumably, as Higgins would have told the authorities, at the hand of an angry ex-client or competitor in business. Farley, after all, had made numerous enemies throughout his business career.

Now, however, the plan was becoming ever clearer, ever more believable. With any luck, the body wouldn't be found until the snow melted in spring. Then Higgins, distraught over his partner's six-month absence, could sadly tell investigators of Farley's increasing moodiness, his trips away from the office for days at a time, his lack of contact with his clients, many of whom had been asking about him. Higgins would then tell the authorities how he'd been obliged to take over the neglected accounts, hoping every day that his long-time partner would return.

"Oh, this is wonderful!" exclaimed Higgins aloud, as he rounded a steep curve and spotted the sign indicating the Forest Service cutoff that would lead him to the campground.

The cold rain had already turned to snow, here at only three thousand feet, and Higgins grinned at the thought of the deep piles of white stuff that must by now be collecting within the confines of the large campground. He had only to find a relatively high mound of snow,

drop the stiff corpse into its depths, perhaps pat down the surface of the snow a bit, and drive off.

Only a mile from the campsites now, Higgins eased the station wagon up the rapidly disintegrating road surface. He would have to begin the process of telling people that Farley had disappeared, starting with his wife, due back on Monday. Having whined to her regularly about his partner, Higgins would find it easy to subtly redirect his obvious contempt into a show of concern about Farley's health, and his wife would then be able to back up his claims to the authorities if his sincerity were ever questioned. Padfield, too, had heard Higgins on occasion come home screaming out loud about his "insane" partner. It wouldn't take too much to convince Padfield that Farley had suddenly ceased to appear at the office, a victim of tension, burnout, whatever one wanted to call the fairly common professional persons' illness that seemed so publicized these days. No, thought Higgins, this was one plan without a hitch. His wife and neighbor and the numerous clients at the office would swallow everything that he'd relate about Farley in the weeks ahead, preparing them for the eventual shock to come when

his ex-partner's body was discovered.

The car slipped a bit as it rolled across the packed snow, rutted with the tracks of cars and trailers that had earlier made their exodus from the area. Still, the road could be traveled without chains, and Higgins intended to be done with the job and out of the mountains as soon as possible.

At last he reached the entrance to the loop of a gravel road, now totally snow-covered, that wound past the more than four dozen designated campsites. Some were mere turn-outs, intended for tent campers, while others were full hook-up sites for trailers and recreational vehicles. All were devoid of life, and had been left in such a hurry this snowy Saturday morning that, in a few cases, the snow piling up on top of the wooden park tables revealed the lumps and bumps of beer cans, potato chip bags, plastic plates, and Styrofoam cups left from the night before. The snow must have come early, thought Higgins, surprising the early risers when they looked out of their tents and trailer windows at the wintry scene around them.

When he thought he had reached the approximate midpoint of the loop, he pulled the station wagon to a halt and got

out. Having rushed away from home in such a hurry, he had neglected to bring a coat, or gloves, and he shivered as he stood out in the blowing snow, surveying the surrounding area for a likely spot. Then he saw a large clump of snow-covered bushes, forming a sort of screen between this campsite and the next one over. He shuffled through the wet snow and over to the bushes, which were beginning to resemble the flocked Christmas trees that little Jimmy had so often admired during the family's annual trek to the local tree lot. Perhaps, thought Higgins, the bushes might offer an even better spot to deposit Farley.

There the corpse would be less likely to be disturbed by snow plows, Forest Service vehicles, and snowmobiles later in the season. The snow was deeper there, and Higgins found himself up to his knees in it by the time he reached the bushes. He thrust his arms into the dense green branches and separated two limbs, to see what the space was like beneath.

It was better than he could have hoped—beneath the outer, overgrown bushy limbs of the hedge, was a cave-like area of sizeable measurement. It would easily accommodate Farley, and would corroborate all of Higgins' future accounts of Farley's

growing disenchantment with his business affairs and life in general. In his disoriented state, and in seeking to remove himself from the real world, Farley would be seen to have crawled under the bushes to hide from reality and wait for death.

It was almost too perfect, mused Higgins. Then he caught a glimpse of sudden movement in a far corner of the clearing under the shrubbery. His eyes, slowly adjusting to the dim light, at last made out two bodies, both dark-clad and lying close together. He squinted and strained his eyes to get a better look. Suddenly he was grabbed by the sleeve from behind, and was whirled around to find himself facing a large, bearded man with a swarthy complexion and one earring.

"Good God!" exclaimed Higgins.

"What the hell are you doing, pipsqueak?" demanded the immense, leather-clad man, as he gripped Higgins' arm with force enough to crack a coconut. At the same moment two figures pushed their way out of the bushes. One was another man, dressed in black leather like the one who held Higgins. The other was a young woman, similarly dressed, who now struggled in the cold air with the top three buttons of her blouse. There was little doubt in Hig-

gins' mind as to what he had inadvertently stumbled into beneath the shrubbery.

"Creep!" the woman said to Higgins in a sharp voice.

"What's the matter, fella . . . not getting any at home?" added her partner in a growl.

"I'm terribly sorry," began Higgins meekly, "but I assure you that I never intended . . ."

His voice was drowned out by the sound of several loud engines being started, and suddenly four large black motorcycles rolled into view from the campsite on the other side of the vegetation. Each held a large and burly driver, and all six of the black-garbed, bearded men now stared silently at Higgins, who again meekly offered "I'm sorry" as his only response.

"Just playing hide and seek, right fella?" said the man who continued to hold Higgins tightly. "Well, we've got a real good place for trash like you to hide." With that, the man lifted Higgins off the ground and proceeded to carry him, as one might carry a log to a fireplace, over to a large trash receptacle nearby. Higgins knew what was coming next.

The bikers roared away down the snow-covered loop trail, their loud laughter and catcalls nearly as earsplitting as the sound of their motorcycles.

Slowly Higgins pulled himself to his feet and crawled out of the dumpster, catching a leg on the edge and falling to the ground in the process. He rose to find himself facing a Forest Service ranger, who helped brush Higgins off and asked if he were injured.

"Heard those fellows clear over at the station," he said, shaking his head as he spoke. "Hope they didn't hurt you too much. It's bad enough that the snow spoiled your plans, without those idiots coming along."

"Er, what plans?" asked Higgins nervously.

"Why, camping of course, what else?"

"Nothing," answered Higgins, "nothing at all. Have a nice day, sir." He shuffled quickly through the snow and back to the station wagon, silently cursing his luck all along. Putting the car in gear, he pulled back onto the roadway and drove out of the campground and back to the main highway. As the large flakes of snow continued to fall around him, Higgins headed back down the winding road toward home . . . again.

But after only a few minutes of driving, Higgins abruptly changed his mind. He would not go home again—he had reached the point of no return

and today—now—he would finish the job and be done with it.

Looking around him as he maneuvered the car down the icy-slick road, he was determined to find a place and a way to rid himself of Farley once and for all. Even in death the pompous bastard seemed to be making a fool of Higgins, ruining his plans, and ever ready to say "I told you so" each time Higgins failed to achieve his goals.

"Well, you won't beat me this time, Farley," he yelled to the corpse in the back of the wagon. "This time I'm going to have the last laugh!"

Then he saw it, a sharp curve in the roadway, beyond which was a sheer drop to the canyon below. Higgins slammed on the brakes, and began to skid. He took his foot off the pedal, brought the car back into control, and eased the car to a stop some twenty feet from the edge. He took a deep breath and looked through the windshield at the panoramic view beyond. To simply pitch Farley over the edge and be done with it was tempting, but he stopped to think instead. What if they found the body before spring—would the plan still work? He continued to ponder: the story he would tell his wife, the neighbors, and Farley's clients could still be used, but the real

uncertainty was the timing of Farley's discovery. Unless the body dropped into some shrubbery or snow, Higgins realized, Farley could be spotted as early as the next morning, if a plane should happen to be passing over the site. No, he had to be sure that the body would roll until it stopped under some sort of cover.

Higgins stepped out of the car to get a better look at the precipice in front of him. He also had to be certain that it was a long enough fall to kill someone. It was. A sheer drop of two hundred feet or more onto bare granite, which sloped steeply towards a thick forest of pines. Farley's body would hit the granite and roll into the trees, out of sight and soon to be covered with a soft blanket of snow. It would work; it had to, thought Higgins, as he stood at the edge of the cliff, the wind whipping around him.

Suddenly the sound of crunching snow interrupted his thoughts, and Higgins quickly knew the sound to be that of tires rolling slowly over the crusty surface of the highway. Another car! He would have to get back to the wagon quickly to avoid suspicion. But when he whirled around expecting to see a second vehicle, he saw only the dirty, dark blue station wagon he had parked some twenty

feet away. But now, Higgins realized, it was rolling slowly towards him, towards the edge of the cliff. Somehow, the brake hadn't held—the car had slipped into neutral. Somehow . . . the sound of a car horn interrupted his thoughts. It was his own horn. Higgins strained his eyes, peering through the blowing snow at the windshield of his own car, slowly rolling towards him. He froze where he stood as his eyes met those of Farley. His ex-partner now sat behind the steering wheel and a grin like that of a skeleton was planted on his otherwise lifeless face. Farley's stiff, chalk-white hands gripped the steering wheel and the horn sounded once again. The car rolled forward more quickly, but Higgins was stiff with fright and could only continue to stare in disbelief as the station wagon, a leering corpse for a driver, mowed into him and continued to roll until it flew into space, then crashed onto the cold granite floor below, exploding into flames.

The fatal crash was discovered by a plane flying overhead the following morning. The investigation team was able to sum things up after an afternoon of telephone calls. Higgins, it turned out, had been increasingly

moody and bitter at work, and acting strangely at other times of the day as well. A neighbor, and even a local hardware store owner, attested to this, and Higgins' wife had to agree with the consensus, when questioned by police.

She had returned home from a trip out of town to find her husband gone, and after discovering he had not shown up at the office, she had reported him missing. When Farley had not come to work or called in either, it was naturally assumed the two men were together. Higgins had likely contacted his lifelong partner the day before, wishing to confide in his associate about his personal and work-related difficulties before they became too severe. During a long drive into the mountains, perhaps with the peaceful surroundings in mind, the vehicle slid off the icy road and flew off the cliff. Farley had died first, and was found still at the wheel of the blackened vehicle. It was assumed that he had been doing the driving due to Higgins'

nervous state of mind. Higgins had been thrown free, dying sometime later from a combination of injuries suffered and exposure to the elements.

"It's a real shame," the attendant said as he and his co-worker lifted the bodies one by one into the ambulance. "I heard the cops say they were business partners."

"Probably good friends," added the other attendant.

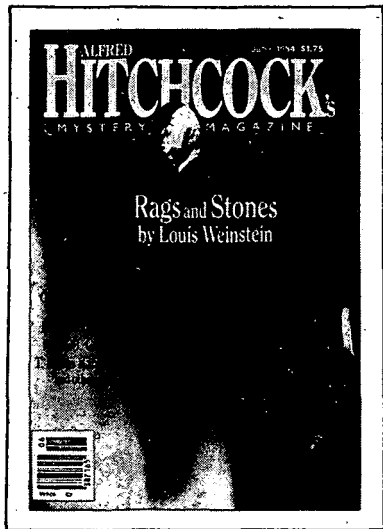
"At least they died pretty quickly," said the first attendant, closing the back doors of the ambulance. "Probably little or no suffering involved."

"Maybe they're up there somewhere together," replied the second attendant, somewhat wistfully.

"Partners in death as well as in life, huh? Yeah, that's a nice thought, a real nice thought."

The ambulance drove slowly down the snow-covered highway, followed by a state patrol car and the tow truck, which carried the burnt and twisted remains of the dark blue station wagon.

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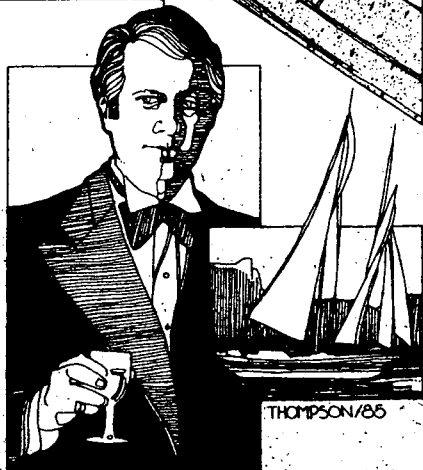


Illustration by George Thompson

I was sitting in my office over The Creamery restaurant eating an egg salad sandwich and thinking of how much money I wasn't making, when in walked a gentleman wearing a shepherd's plaid sportcoat and alligator shoes. He looked with distaste at my feet on the desk, the bottle of Genesee at my elbow, and the egg on my fingers. I twitched a shoe and left it there. His voice had a faint British accent, which I suspected was more the result of too much money than of having actually lived in England.

"Burton Foxx?"

"None other."

"The private investigator?"

"Yup."

He looked around the seedy office, at the water-stained ceiling and cracked windowpane the landlord had been on the verge of fixing for two years. "Excuse me for barging in like this without an appointment, but I happened to be passing through the neighborhood."

I'm not crazy about my lunch hour's being disturbed, but business had been slow lately, and if it didn't pick up there might not be any more lunch hours. I swung my size twelves onto the floor, knocking over the beer. "Aw, no!" I watched the yellow foam seep into my sandwich. "I was hungry, too."

The visitor edged towards the

door. "Really sorry to bother you, detective."

I swept the mess into a paper bag and dropped it in the wastebasket. "Goodbye, lunch. Oh well, I need to lose a few pounds. Are you going to tell me who you are before you leave?"

"Rainer Ackland," he said stiffly. He watched me, perhaps expecting me to jump up and stand at attention.

Ackland? Then a bell rang in the back of my head. A few days ago a wealthy real estate broker, Lindley Ackland, had fallen off the roof of his three story mansion while repairing a chimney and had been killed. Nothing in the papers suggested it was anything but an accident. I sat up a little farther.

"You're not going to tell me he was pushed?" But he did tell me that, and though skeptical I sat up all the way. With a pained expression the visitor looked at the yellow stain on my desktop.

"Mr. Foxx, it's lunchtime. Yours has been, er, spoiled, and I haven't eaten yet. Will you join me as my guest at The Creamery downstairs? Perhaps over a lobster Newburg or sirloin we can discuss this matter more fully."

I pursed my lips thoughtfully, hoping none of the saliva would dribble down my chin.

“Quite a fellow,” I said over a glass of chilled Lillet when my host had finished describing his brother. “He doesn’t sound like the sort of person someone would want to push off a roof.”

The gray unblinking eyes studied me. “He wasn’t—except by a very twisted mind. And I’m afraid such a person exists, and in his own family. My brother has two sons: the older, Chad, is a personable and successful investment banker, the younger, Mark, a messed up kid if there ever was one. Despite the fact that, at the age of twenty-two, he has a tidy trust fund that allows him to have his own apartment here in Montpelier and do nothing, he’s been dealing in dope for years. It’s my hunch that his father found out and told him to clean up his act or he would turn him in.”

Flo brought my *boeuf bourgignon* and, as she drew away, shot me a smile and a wink as if to say, My, aren’t we eating well today! For the past two weeks it’d been mostly soup and egg sandwiches. “How do you know your nephew sells dope?”

He winced, looked down at his fillet of sole as though he’d lost his appetite. His voice was quiet when he spoke again. “My daughter, Tina. He introduced her to marijuana and cocaine

and then, when she was hooked on the stuff, sold it to her. Fortunately she’s seen the light and is off that poison now. Mark isn’t.”

“Your theory then is that Mark preferred to kill his father rather than stop selling dope?”

“He couldn’t change his life, and he knew it. He once was a bright, goodlooking kid, but that stuff has totally ruined him. Burned out both his brain and his ethical sense. I’m telling you, Mr. Foxx, just being near him now gives me the willies.”

“Can’t wait to meet him,” I said spearing a gravy-drenched piece of beef.

Gertrude Ackland glared at me from her easy chair by a window overlooking a rose hedge and a lawn as big as a football field. Short and dumpy, with a triple chin and a coarse complexion, she wasn’t exactly easy on the eyeballs. The Japanese cook-chauffeur-you-name-it who worked for her hovered by a vase of flowers near the door. I had driven out to the estate from Montpelier in my aging Valiant and met Rainer Ackland there.

“Thank you, Rainer,” she growled.

My client shrugged. “I know how you feel, Gertie, but I’m not satisfied Lindley’s death was

an accident. I've hired Mr. Foxx to decide the matter one way or the other."

The gorgon eyes swung back to me. "Do you enjoy disturbing grief-stricken widows, sir?"

"Hardly, Mrs. Ackland." It was a stifflingly hot day and I pulled out a red handkerchief and mopped my brow. "In fact, I find it very unpleasant. Please allow me to extend my deepest sympathy."

Her face softened a bit, and she did not object when Rainer handed me a photo album with the last two pages showing shots of Lindley posing on his yacht *Bienfait* in Mallets Bay; on one of his riding horses; standing beside a half-finished bookcase with a hammer in his hand; beaming with a grandchild in his arms. He was a tall, statuesque man with a touch of silver in his sideburns and an infectious smile. He seemed to radiate good will and an enjoyment of life. There was one shot in particular of Lindley and Gertrude Ackland dressed in slacks and shortsleeved shirts on the aft deck of the *Bienfait*: her expression was obscured by the wind sweeping hair across her brow, but his was exuberant as he stood with one foot on the transom, holding a rolled-up chart. A picture of the good life, featuring a man who had absolutely no qualms about liv-

ing it. I was wondering why such a dashing devil would hitch up with such a lumpy, plain wife until I flipped through the album and saw a much younger and slimmer Mrs. Ackland in a wedding gown. The years had not been kind to her.

"These photos suggest an unusually attractive, charming man," I said. "In fact—" I stopped myself.

"Yes? Go on."

"Nothing. I was just thinking of my brother, who's sort of unusual himself. Your husband reminds me of Scott: slender and handsome, whereas I—well, we won't go into what I look like. Star basketball player in college, graduated *magna cum laude*, presently head of a successful high tech firm outside of Boston, et cetera, et cetera."

"How interesting," Rainer said dryly, rising from his chair. "Please excuse me, but I must be off." We watched him move across the room—elegant, graceful, cold.

His sister-in-law stirred in her easy chair. "Perhaps you'd like a tour around the grounds, Mr. Foxx? Some exercise before lunch would do me good."

We strolled through a well-kept flower garden, past a marble dolphin jetting water into a basin—the cool air around the statue was delicious in the thick heat—and went across the spa-

cious lawn to the stables. Though overweight, my guide moved with surprising briskness, and I had to huff along to keep up. In the first stall her husband's favorite horse, Baron, a long-limbed chestnut, snorted and pawed the ground. Beside him in the next box was a sleek black mare.

"Do you ride, Mr. Foxx?"

"Not really." I moved back a step from Baron's tossing head.

For the first time since my arrival she smiled, briefly. "I used to ride a lot with my husband—even did some jumping—but the fun seems to have gone out of it for me now. The poor horses need exercise, too. Mark doesn't like to ride at all, and Chad lives in Boston. I'm afraid I'll have to sell them, but I just can't bring myself to do it." Her voice caught; quickly she turned away.

Walking back to the house she said, "I suppose you'll want to have a closer look at the roof where my husband fell, but perhaps before undertaking that you'd care to join me and Mark for a light lunch?"

"Er . . . sure."

"I'll tell Tori to set another place."

A light lunch? The meal we had was as close to a light lunch as a baseball bat is to a toothpick—but I didn't complain. The Acklands were treating me well,

with two sumptuous meals in as many days. We started with vichyssoise, moved on to lobster in a cream sauce with corn on the cob and string beans almandine, and ended with a raspberry torte and coffee. My hostess clearly loved to eat, and an unspoken bond arose between us.

Rainer was right, the third person at the table, Mark, was a bit on the creepy side. He resembled his uncle a little, with a long, somewhat droopy face like a wax bust that had gotten too close to the flame, and slender, delicate fingers. He wore new blue jeans and a short-sleeved shirt; his blond hair was razor cut. He looked a bit over the hill for his age, with sagging eyes and sallow skin, but I couldn't agree with Rainer that his brain was burned out. He was sharp-witted and caustic, though not to his mother. On several occasions he cast her fond looks, reserving his sourness for the guest. It seemed to me that beneath the unpleasantness there lurked a sensitivity, even a shyness, and I found it difficult to believe he could have murdered his father.

"It's delicious," I said in response to Mrs. Ackland's offer of more torte, "but I couldn't manage another piece."

Mark stared pointedly at my waist and snickered. "Come on,

Mr. Foxx, there's plenty more. By the looks of things you're used to second helpings."

"Mark!" Mrs. Ackland glared at her son, and with a disagreeable sigh he fell silent.

I shouldn't have eaten so much. My stomach seasawed as I looked at the dormer window about the size of a rathole that I now had to cram myself through. Mrs. Ackland had shown me that attic door and then gone back downstairs. Something scurried away in a corner as I walked across the dimly-lit room, which was like a furnace in that heat. The Acklands' attic was the usual morgue for old possessions: scarred steamer trunks covered with dust, patched canvas tents, an English saddle the mice seemed to have been dining on. Near a stack of beartrap skis and poles was the window. It had been left open, probably to provide ventilation. I stuck my head out and saw, about six feet along a steeply pitched slate roof, a brick chimney. Goosepimples spread over my arms. I don't consider myself a chicken, but the thought of climbing out on those slates didn't excite me, especially since I was convinced that Mrs. Ackland was right: no one had pushed her husband, he had simply lost his footing

and taken a dive. From where I stood I could see two loose bricks near the chimney's base, the ones that Lindley Ackland must have intended to reset.

I knocked on the sill for good luck and threw a leg over. I hesitated a final moment, but Rainer was paying me a lot of money and I had to do something to earn it besides eat.

The tiles were like hot grid-dles and took some swearing to get used to. I edged across on my hands and knees to the chimney, thinking Lindley had guts to crawl out there to do a repair job. Holding onto the coping, I pulled myself up. Below, a man on a tractor, wearing a Metros baseball cap, was mowing one of the estate's meadows. Sunlight danced on the arc of water from the dolphin's mouth.

There was something a little odd about the two loose bricks. You'd think they would have worked their way out sideways, but these were at right angles to the rest of the chimney. Had Lindley been in the act of removing them when he fell? I bent over for a closer look.

"Hey!" Something sharp was poking me in the back, and I whirled around and knocked away a ski pole. The pole bounced on the tiles, and clattered down the roof. Mark Ackland's pasty face gaped at me

from the attic window as he withdrew his arm. I started to reach for the Beretta strapped under my left armpit, then thought better. He made no attempt to hide or run, just stood in the window glowering.

"Why don't you leave us alone, damn you. Mother's suffered enough already."

"I've been hired to find out who murdered your father."

"No one murdered him, you klutz. It was an accident, he fell."

"I thought so, too," I told him, edging across the tiles, "until now."

He reached to the side of the window and produced a ski, shook it at me a couple of times, and then with a curse threw it across the room. He was swearing and shaking like a leaf when I put the cuffs on him.

A bitter smile played across Rainer's lips. "I was hoping I was wrong about Mark, that my brother really did die accidentally." He shook his stylishly coiffed head, his eyes ineffably sad. "Is there a more heinous crime than a son's killing his father? I shouldn't say this, Mr. Foxx, but I'm truly sorry Vermont doesn't have the death penalty."

"Yeah." We stood on the front lawn of the mansion, looking up

at the chimney. I had just deposited Mark at the North Mills police station on a charge of aggravated assault. Despite what he'd done I was still having trouble finding him as dangerous as his uncle made him out to be. If he'd really wanted to finish me off, he wouldn't have poked at me with a ski pole. I think he just wanted me off the case, didn't want a P.I. nosing around the estate creating a bad impression, and I told Rainer so.

He shook his head vigorously. "You know, I'm a little disappointed in you, detective. What does it take to make you believe someone like Mark is rotten? I'm telling you he is, and somehow you've got to prove he pushed his father." I nodded grimly, and kept to myself the thought that we were on a wild goose chase.

Rainer patted down the sides of his hair with the tips of well-manicured fingers. "Did you find anything of interest when you climbed out to look at the chimney?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I was interrupted before I got a good look." For some reason just thinking of that chimney made me sweat.

"You mean you're going to have to go out there again?"

I made a face like I'd just eaten something that should have

been left in its can. "Unless you can come up with a better idea. I don't suppose there's a pair of sneakers around I could borrow?"

He glanced down at my feet and made a feeble effort to suppress a smile. "Nothing in your size, I'm afraid."

Here we go again, I thought, standing in the attic with my hand on the sill. Strapped to my back was a canvas knapsack I'd found in a pile of camping gear. At least I hadn't eaten a big meal a few minutes ago. I was wondering if I couldn't study the two loose bricks with a pair of binoculars instead of crawling across the roof again, when my fingers brushed something on the sill. I looked down and saw a nail that had sprung a little, a clot of maroon threads wrapped around it where someone had caught his clothing. The color of the threads was vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it. I put them in a Sucrets box I carried around for evidence and slung my leg over the sill a second time.

The tread on the rubber soles of my Oxfords was half gone, so I took it even slower this time. Maybe I should have eaten more and gone faster because halfway across, my shoe hit a sweaty spot left from my hand and I

started to slide. There was a shriek from below as I snatched at a slate, praying it would hold. Two more steps and I had an arm around the chimney. After my pulse had dropped back to two digits, I noticed Mrs. Ackland on the lawn with her mouth still open, a plump hand on her chest. This time when I crouched to study the bricks, no one tried anything funny and I was able to get a good look at them. One of the bricks had a squarish gouge along its side, as if someone had pried at it with a chisel or screwdriver. On the thousand to one chance there might be an identifiable print, I put the bricks into two sandwich baggies and placed them in the knapsack. Then I crept back to the window without slipping. I was getting better at it.

“Another slice of duck, Mr. Foxx?"

It was another warm day and while I reached up with one hand to loosen my tie, the other hand slid quietly under the table and undid my belt a notch. Though Tori gave me the creeps with his noiseless tread and sleepy, faintly hostile eyes, I had to admit he was a fine chef. I'd already had two generous helpings of duck in orange sauce, with wild rice and asparagus—

tips. Not to mention a delicious leek soup to kick off the meal, and several homemade rolls. "I really couldn't, Mrs. Ackland."

My hostess shoved her plate away with its skimpy remains from two helpings of her own. "I don't even know why I've asked you to dine with me again, especially since you've put my son in jail. Perhaps it's because I admire your sangfroid—climbing out onto that roof twice to pursue your investigations. You're a brave man. Not brilliant perhaps, but brave."

I inclined my head, wondering if that was a compliment or a dig.

"I hope by now you're convinced that Mark didn't push his own father off the roof."

"He tried to push me off."

"Oh come now, with a dinky little ski pole? A rather half-hearted attempt, I should say. I think it's clear he was simply trying to scare you off the case. Being investigated by a detective is not exactly good for the family's reputation, you know. But I don't blame you so much as I do my precious brother-in-law. Poor Rainer, he's got it in his head that Lindley was so perfect he couldn't possibly fall off the roof on his own accord."

"By the way, Mrs. Ackland, do you remember what your

husband was wearing when he climbed out on the roof?"

She looked at me for a long time without speaking. "What could that possibly have to do with anything?"

"Perhaps it has no relevance, but I'd still like to know."

She heaved a weary sigh. "What he almost always wore when he puttered around the estate: khakis."

"How about Mark?"

"Good heavens, Mr. Foxx, how am I supposed to remember what everyone wore almost two weeks ago? Bluejeans, I suppose, he's quite partial to them. And probably a polo shirt."

"Can you remember what color the shirt was?"

She laid her fork down and looked at me imploringly. "Please, Mr. Foxx, I just can't . . . blue, I think. Yes, blue." She raised a hand to her eyes. "What difference does it make, does anything make? The main thing is that my husband is gone. Gone gone gone. Do you realize what that means, Mr. Foxx, to lose someone you've lived with for thirty-five years?"

She wiped a tear away and looked at me. "What's wrong? You suddenly look pale."

I was. I was staring at her bare wrist. The silk sleeve of her blouse had drifted up, revealing three red slashes. The flesh had been deeply scratched

in places, a scab had formed and was starting to peel off. Was that why Mrs. Ackland always wore longsleeved blouses, though I had seen her on three unusually hot days? I recalled that in several of the photographs in the album she had worn short sleeves.

"I'm fine, thank you. The same old story, I'm afraid: the food is so tempting that I've eaten more than I should have." Suddenly something else clicked. The slacks she was wearing in the snapshot of her and Lindley on the deck of their yacht were the same color as the threads in my pocket, maroon. A gray-sleeved arm darted around my shoulder and silently scooped up my plate.

"Perhaps you'll recover enough to try dessert. We have a choice today. Tori's own special carrot cake, or a chocolate mousse. Indeed, if you're up to it, you're welcome to sample both." Tori glided out of the room with our plates. "You don't look enthusiastic, Mr. Foxx."

"Do you remember that photograph of you and your husband on the aft deck of the *Bienfait*? You were dressed in maroon slacks."

The jowly face went still, only the eyes seemed to remain alive.

"I wonder, could I possibly see those slacks?"

Her three chins reddened,

her voice took on a harsh tone. "I find that a rather impertinent request. Why should you take such an interest in my wardrobe?"

"Have you worn those pants since your husband's death?"

The cook had come back in and was waiting for our orders. "Thank you, Tori," she said. "I am afraid we over-indulged in the duck and won't be taking dessert. Could we have coffee, please?" He eased back to the kitchen, passing within inches of me with his lithe frame.

"There's a rip in the seat, isn't there? Where you hooked yourself climbing through the attic window that afternoon your husband was on the roof. Those red marks on your left wrist, which you've tried to conceal with long sleeves, were caused by his fingernails—" A flash of gray, something was around my neck choking me, dragging me backwards. I flailed with my arms but his grip tightened, and I knew I was going to black out.

"Tori, stop! I command you!" The iron grip loosened. Massaging my throat and coughing, I sat up.

"So you knew, Tori," Mrs. Ackland said. "Well, that doesn't surprise me, since there's very little that goes on around here you don't know about. Please accept my apologies, Mr. Foxx,

for Tori's excessive zeal in protecting me. Yes, the day before it happened, I pried out two bricks that were already loose, and then showed them to Lindley when he came home from work. He went up the next day, a Saturday, with his trowel and some mortar. I climbed out onto the roof after him; he thought I had come to help and didn't realize his mistake until it was too late. When he grabbed my arm, I held onto the chimney and kicked him away."

Silence. The faint hum of a car going by on Bayberry Lane. She looked straight ahead, through the mullioned windows overlooking the hedge of pink roses.

"Thank God you've figured it out," she whispered. "I couldn't bear the thought of Mark's going to prison for a crime he didn't commit, and yet I lacked the courage to step forward and save him. No, that's wrong. I was too satisfied with myself for finally having done something well, even if it was committing a foul crime." Seeing my expression, she laughed unhappily. "You don't understand, do you?"

"No."

"But your brother, Mr. Foxx? No, no matter how much you envied him his accomplishments you couldn't kill him,

could you? You're basically a decent person, whereas I'm afraid I'm not. In a nutshell, the reason I killed Lindley is that he was too perfect. Handsome, dashing, witty, gallant, kind, he had it all. People flocked to him like bees to honey. Whereas I, his sad dumpy wife, was a spectacular nobody. My sole identity—besides a reputation for being inordinately fond of good food—was as Lindley Ackland's wife. I've lost you, haven't I?"

"I'm afraid so."

She laughed then, and it wasn't her usual sour chuckle but rather a throaty bellow. "Marvelous! I'm so glad you don't understand." She reached out and patted my hand. "You're going to blush when I tell you this, Mr. Foxx, but I like you. You're in your forties and yet you're still, in many ways, innocent. You're also delightfully imperfect. Will you do me a favor—after, of course, you call the police and have me properly arrested? Will you stay that way?"

I don't know what I said then, but it wasn't anything worth saving for posterity. I drank down the cup of coffee Tori set beside me, hoping that would help. But it didn't. We sat there in the warm room staring at the roses.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



And on the other end of that line is probably . . . We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

Hunting the Tiger's Eye

by Ruthven Earle- Patrick



Illustration by Ronald Chironna

So far, he had seen no one. Traps, Strategists, Traitors, he had shaken them all. And now he was almost home. Twenty paces to the red oak, fifteen, now five. He stopped short, seized by the idea of a pair of eyes glinting in the thigh-deep grass. Metallic eyes. He looked again, saw no one, and hurried on. The red oak's limb arched over the river to the other side, home. Glancing back one last time, he climbed up and inched his way outward, over the water. At the limb's edge, he sucked in his breath and jumped.

He landed on metal.

Beneath him, the earth splintered like shrapnel. He staggered down to the river and collapsed. Blood was trickling from a small wound on his forehead. He wanted to rise but the earth shifted under him, the sun throbbed, faded. . . .

His first clear thought was the orb. Fumbling with buttons, he dragged a small crystal sphere from his shirt and tried to focus. Streaks of gold fire shot through the emerald iris, winking in daylight. It was whole. He nudged closer to the river, letting it rush over his skull, cooling the slow pulse of pain in his forehead. Closing his eyes, he thought of Peter. He must congratulate this new one. He would never have sus-

pected a Trap at the finish line. As for the next run, there would be plenty of time to teach him what "Victim" meant.

Inside the cave, four boys sat near the fire, watching Peter stash his last colored stone. For a novice, he had won a fair number, at Daryl's expense. Daryl was beginning to get up, clumsily, steadying himself against the wall of the cave. Peter was reminded of an alien not yet used to Earth's gravity. "How's the head?" he said, sounding genuinely concerned. "Hurts like hell. What did you put in those mines, TNT?"

Peter smiled and tossed a twig in the fire. "It's a military secret. My dad taught me. Thought you'd get a kick out of it." He leaned forward, eyes catching the sudden blaze, burning with the glow of achievement. The younger boys especially were in awe, if also a little frightened.

Daryl roused himself at the mention of Peter's father. "Your dad?" he said casually. "I thought he was confined to a wheelchair." He looked around at the boys. Nobody laughed, but the glow around Peter was gone.

"My father got blasted in the war," he said simply, without embarrassment.

"Yeah. Sure." Again Daryl

looked at the others. It was clear whose side they were on. "Didn't everybody's?" he said. Terry and Simon giggled. Jude looked away as if offended. But with Jude, it was hard to tell. "Come on, guys," said Daryl, heading toward the cave entrance. "Mose is still out on the field. Jude, tell the war hero about Friday night." Obediently, the two young ones trailed out behind Daryl.

After the others had gone, Jude sat down beside Peter and said, "You know, for a novice, you sure pack a lot of punch. Why did you set that mine for Daryl? You nearly blew his head off."

"Flatterer," said Peter, with a sarcastic smile. "I barely singed his eyebrows. You wanted a Trap. I set one."

"So your little surprise package earned you a few points. To get ahead in this game takes more than that. You've got to use a little creative intelligence."

"Okay, genius, how come *you're* not running things around here?"

Jude's face relaxed into a grin. "Guess I'm not ambitious. But you are. And besides," he stood up and brushed off his jeans, "Daryl has the orb."

Peter glanced up. "So?"

Jude was already on his way out. He turned back briefly, his

face smoothed into innocence. "Right now, that's Daryl's little surprise package. But after Friday, who knows? Show up at the warehouse at nine." And he was gone.

"Peter? Where the devil is that boy?" Mr. Rourke wheeled his chair violently into the piano room.

His wife peered at him over her novel. "Peter isn't here, dear. He left an hour ago for one of his meetings."

Peter's father yanked off his spectacles and aimed them at the baby grand occupying the center of the room. "Three paychecks I spent to collect cobwebs?" He jammed his glasses back into place. "He has no time for anything lately. Including homework."

His wife put down her novel and went over to her husband. "Give him a chance," she said. "Now that he's made a few friends, they might even be doing him some good. You remember the stories he used to tell. Sharks, dragons, dinosaurs. At least now all his characters are human."

Mr. Rourke scowled over his rims. "Some progress," he said.

Peter arrived home just after sunset, pockets jammed with colored stones. He spread them

out on the breakfast-nook table, dug a black magic marker out of the sewing machine drawer, and began initialing each one.

When his mother came in and sat down on the bench opposite, he was still working. She eyed the stones. "Gloating over your spoils? What mad dragon were you after this time?"

Peter was indignant. "That's old, Ma. I was a Strategist. Had them all doing the gosestep over a mine field. Daryl fell off a tree and set off an explosion that cost him four of these." Peter held up a handful of pink, mottled stones. "They're color-graded, see, depending on how big the job is."

His mother picked up a blue one. "Is this the ultimate?"

Peter looked thoughtful. "No," he said slowly. "The orb is. It's all kinds of colors. That's the one I'm going to get next."

She smiled, amused by his determination, and picked up a few of the other stones. "I think you've done well enough for one afternoon," she said, then added casually, almost as an afterthought, "I know one person your father can count on for help with his stories."

Peter took the stones from his mother and began initialing again, distant, absorbed in the task. "No, Mom," he said flatly.

"I couldn't help him with that stuff. That's fantasy."

His mother risked a smile. "Then, Peter, there is one other way you could help your father. You remember the present he bought for you?"

There were rustling noises in the other room. Peter lowered his voice. "Mom, *he* bought that thing. What do I want it for? Mozart was a sissy; Beethoven went deaf. What kind of company is that to keep? I'm an army man. You've either got a mission for something or you don't. And I don't have a mission to play the piano."

"Peter—" his mother began.

"Peter?" his father was shouting from the den. "Peter, have you decided to come home?"

Peter looked at his mother, appealing. "Is he going to start on me?"

She reached for her son's arm. "You've had your fun today," she said gently. "Now it's your father's turn."

"Can't he make his own?" said Peter, hotly.

"My own what?" demanded his father, rolling into the kitchen with a stack of sheet music.

"Dinner," said Mrs. Rourke. She saw the pages in his lap. "Oh look, isn't that *The Sunken Cathedral*?"

Peter looked vaguely interested. "How did it get sunk?

Was it blown up?"

His father's face was a mask of patience. "It sank before bombs were invented. A lost relic it was. Swallowed by time, by the earth." Peter stifled a yawn and began pocketing the pebbles. His father carried on, blithely. "You should be able to master this one, Peter, long before the recital. It's relatively short and not difficult. I'd play it myself to give you an idea—"

"I remember," said Mrs. Rourke, softly. "You played it beautifully. Why don't you try—"

"Alice." His tone cut through her. "The pedal work is vital. I'd rather not spoil it for him."

She nodded. Peter stared at the sheet music, willing it to self-destruct. Again he felt the burden of his father's lost career. Without a word, he pushed the wheelchair toward the piano room while his father chatted about the composer, pointing up a weakness here, an eccentricity there, as he might do with a colorful relative. Peter nodded faintly, from far away, from some distant emerald planet born of his imagination, christened "The Orb."

"Sorry, guys." Daryl came rushing in the back door of the warehouse, apparently fully recovered. He

took his seat by the orb. The rest of the boys had already exchanged news and were now shifting impatiently. Only Peter seemed unconcerned about his lateness.

"What kept you?" said Jude.

"My old man," Daryl said, still catching his breath. "He's been getting out of hand lately. Says the club is taking up too much of my time."

Jude snickered. "He must have seen your chemistry marks."

"So what's wrong with a 'C' here and there? He says with marks like these, I'm not going to make it to medical school. Who says I want to? Wants me to be a surgeon, for God's sake. He's the first one I'd operate on."

Jude started rubbing his palms. "Igor, zee operation vas a success, but zee pashunt died."

Peter stared at Daryl long after the joke was forgotten and the group had lapsed into conversation. His expression was dispassionate, analytical, as though Daryl were some odd insect, curious but disposable. Daryl felt the eyes on him. He raised his hand. "Okay. Peter looks anxious to start." There were a few surprised looks. He waited for quiet. "Tonight we'll follow the regular course," he said. "With one exception. My Strategist tells me the Traps

have been repositioned. So keep your eyes open. Try to anticipate likely changes. And watch for the Traitor. He'll be any one of us. You've got to judge who to trust, who looks suspicious—Terry?"

Terry, the youngest, was waving his arm. He was a small boy but intense, and always played as though it were his own life at stake. "How many Coll—Collabraders this time?"

"There'll be two Collaborators. If you find them, they'll get you back faster, safer; but you've got to decide which ones they are. Because just maybe you'll find yourself talking to the wrong one, the Traitor. Their faces won't give them away." He held up a half dozen black hoods with the eyes slit out. "Their voices won't, either. Nothing's real, nothing's one hundred percent certain in this game but you. The Victim will get a head start—three minutes—before we set out. If he makes it back, this yellow one's his." He held up a stone that glittered like fool's gold. "Otherwise, whoever gets the Victim, gets it." He passed the stone around.

Jude stole a glance at Peter and said, "What about the orb, Daryl? When does that go up for grabs?"

"Tonight," he said sharply. "Who's ready for it? The orb

goes to the first person who demonstrates a little creative intelligence. Anyone who can take Strategy and apply it on the outside. The first person who can expand the game. Are you volunteering, Jude?" Everybody studied Jude.

Jude was silent for a moment, then said darkly, "I'm working on it." The boys laughed, but no one else volunteered.

A few others had questions. While Daryl answered, Peter nudged Simon and whispered, "Who set the Traps tonight?"

Simon's round chin jutted out. "I couldn't tell you, even if I knew." He hesitated, as if debating whether it was safe to go on. "We had a drawing last night for all the positions. Except one."

A sudden fear entered Peter. He leaned closer. "Is that why nobody told me about it?"

Simon shifted nervously, then turned away, suddenly, in a vain attempt to conceal the redness seeping across his cheeks. Peter looked up and discovered the cause of his embarrassment. The others were watching them.

Daryl broke the silence. "Any more questions before you get your head start?"

"What?"

"You're the Guest of Honor tonight."

Peter stared in disbelief. "You keep telling me I'm new at this. Pick somebody else. I'm not ready."

"Peter, we'll die of old age before you're ready. You're going tonight."

Jude pushed him into the center of the group. The rest shone their flashlights in his face. Peter's arm went up, shielding his eyes. "You know the course," Daryl continued. "Around the lagoon, through the old cemetery, across the river, and back home. Now the rest of you, be careful. Because this one's new, he'll be a bit desperate. So make sure he doesn't see you first. Remember: no names, no faces. Okay, Peter. Go! And watch out for the Traitor!"

Jude began the three-minute countdown, while Peter ran out the back door, headed for the lagoon. What a change from Strategist, he thought. All he'd had to do before was run the course and keep an eye out for the Victim. Now that he was "It," even pace was critical. When he ran, he worried about anticipating Traps. He slowed down and felt the others gaining. He glanced around. Every bush seemed a camouflage, every step a Trap. Even the night air smelled of panic. And all for a lousy yellow rock. But no, it wasn't just the rock he

wanted—they wanted. It was the orb, its tiger's-eye glowing, capturing the dull sun, splitting it into emerald, sapphire, ruby, and diamond. It was a jewel, a weapon of rare worth, secret power. And it made Daryl, its discoverer, the Leader. For now.

"Hey!"

Peter sucked in his breath, stifling a scream.

"Don't go that way!" The voice was a staccato whisper, the face a shadow. "Look!" It threw a handful of stones in the direction Peter had been headed. Instantly, a thick rope net dropped from a tree. Peter pictured himself pinned underneath. A Col-laborator, he thought, and breathed a sigh of relief. "This way! Hurry!" said the voice.

Peter followed, cautious, anxious, yet relieved. His skull pounded. He wanted time to think, to breathe. Let someone else make the choices, briefly. If we can only make it to the river, he thought.

They were in the heart of the graveyard now. Stones, crosses, cracked and crippled by time, leaned into the sunken earth. Other open plots gaped, ancient. His guide kept well ahead of him, slowing at intervals to see that Peter was still following. Suddenly he stopped.

"Wait! Ssh! What was that?" The voice was shrill, piercing.

"What?" said Peter, skin prickling. "I didn't hear anything."

"There!" The guide aimed his flashlight at a nearby cross and the dark mass on top: hollowed eye, pumpkin-lit, blood spilling out of the socket and the slack grey mouth: a human head, carved and spitted. Peter turned, wanting to run, but he fell forward, sprawling into a rectangular pit. A shovelful of dirt followed him. Then another. Dirt thudded on his face, in his eyes.

"Traitor!" he screamed, outraged, as the dirt continued to fall. "Traitor!" he wailed until there was nothing left but terror. And then the others came.

One by one the heads appeared. One of them—Jude—grinned as he dangled the rubber Halloween mask over the pit. They shone their flashlights down into Peter's distorted face, laughing. "Ssh, you'll wake the neighbors, little boy." Another crooned, "Don't cry, baby, we're coming to get you." A rope dropped over the side, and as Peter struggled back up, he heard, among the jibes and whispers, "Don't you think this got a little out of hand? It's only his first run."

A shrill, piercing whisper hissed, "You've got a lot to learn about tactics." Peter hardly heard the words. It was

the sound he listened to. The sound of the Traitor's voice. And it belonged to Daryl.

By the time he was back on the surface, he was himself again. With one exception. He was beginning to understand Strategy. He pushed his way through the group, walking briskly, waiting until he was out of sight to run.

When Daryl and the boys returned to the warehouse, Peter was already there, waiting. In his right hand, he held the orb.

"What are you doing with that?" said Daryl, laughing off his surprise.

Peter laughed back. "Like you said: It's time for a little creative intelligence. I'm going to expand this game."

Peter disappeared through the back door, with the orb. Daryl and the boys stared after him. But no one made a move to stop him.

When Peter arrived home, he wanted to slip past his mother, but she saw the strange sphere glowing like a tiger's eye. "Peter," she said, drawn by the colors, "what have you got there?"

"Just the orb I was telling you about," he said casually.

"Just? You must have done something spectacular to lay hands on this one. Tell me about it."

Peter moved past her, an odd light in his eye. "I can't, Mom," he said. "The guys would kill me. Besides, I might have to give it back. This job isn't finished yet."

"Speed up! It's a cathedral, not a funeral parlor. You're forcing it, boy."

"You're a fine one to talk about forcing," Peter muttered under his breath. "Nothing's worse than a backseat pianist."

Three weeks had gone by. And in those three weeks, he had been chained to the piano in an ivory, unflinching grasp that held no promise of relaxing, ever. He had missed so many meetings that the boys had threatened to expel him. But Peter had the orb. So they could threaten all they wanted. For the moment, it was still his move . . . small compensation it sometimes seemed for the hours he spent riveted to the piano, his father barking commands like a drill sergeant. Still he played. And progressed. Not brilliantly, but steadily, plodding towards completion.

Two days later, he was interrupted by a knock at the front door. It was Jude.

"There's a meeting tonight in Daryl's basement. Can you make it? Or do they still keep

you chained to the piano?"

"I'll be there. Don't worry about me."

"I don't." He paused, suddenly serious. "But Daryl does. How come you two don't get along?"

Peter looked angry. "What do you want me to do, send him a valentine?"

"Just don't get on the wrong side of him. You're new at this game, Peter. You've got the orb. But does that make you an expert? If that's what you think, you're in for a surprise. You don't know Daryl."

"Daryl doesn't know me, either," he said, impatient now. "Two things I've learned already in this game. Don't trust anybody, including you. And the first principle of attack is surprise. Maybe Daryl's the one with the surprise coming." He moved to close the door.

Jude put his hand out to stop him and stepped inside, his face suddenly rigid, almost a sneer. "You think that's all there is to Strategy? If that's all you've got up your sleeve, you'll find yourself back in the pit."

Peter's eyes flashed. "But that's *not* all," he said, his fingers tightening around the doorknob until the knuckles were white. "This job isn't finished yet, Jude. I've already shown a little creative intelligence."

"What makes you think so?"

Peter nodded towards the piano room. "Look at the orb."

Jude remained skeptical. Even on the way home he squashed the doubt that crept into his mind, a doubt that surfaced again immediately. More and more the orb looked like some animal eye watching. And never had he seen it glow so red.

Daryl opened the meeting, borrowing a few beers from his father's fridge. "So, Mozart," he said, handing Peter one, "how's your little piece going—what's it called again?"

"The Sunken Cathedral. And don't call me Mozart. It's bad enough the old man thinks I'm Debussy."

Daryl studied Peter through his beer glass. "Pops giving you a hard time?"

Peter chose his words carefully. "No worse than yours," he said. "He doesn't have any crazy ideas about turning me into a brain surgeon like yours. Mine just squats over me like a drill sergeant."

The boys laughed. Daryl asked, "When's D-Day?"

"Two weeks."

"Well, you're not hung yet." Daryl continued, casually, "Where's it going to be?"

"At St. James Cathedral.

Where I take lessons. Where else would it be?" He spoke sharply, annoyed by the sudden interest.

Daryl rubbed his forehead and laughed. "Knowing you, in a mine field."

Peter smiled. The atmosphere was almost friendly. "Yeah," he said. "That's one cathedral I wouldn't mind sinking. How come your father isn't down here chasing us out of his fridge?"

"Pops had to go to the factory."

"Something come up?"

"Something blew up. One of the gas drums. Some worker smoking on the job, looks like."

"Figures," Peter smiled. Jude looked at him oddly.

After Peter had gone home, Jude sat staring at Daryl, nursing his beer. "What do you think?" he said, after a long silence.

Daryl looked disgusted. "I think they should tattoo a no-smoking sign on the foreman's forehead."

"I don't care what you say. I saw the orb."

"Yeah. But I saw the foreman."

When Peter arrived home that night, his mother opened the front door. It was unusual for her to be up that late.

"Hi, Mom," he said. "What's up?"

"Miss Stark phoned," she said, leading him into the living room. "She said some chemicals had been taken out of the storage room. She wanted to know if you knew anything about it."

Peter slumped casually into a chair beside her. "Not a thing, Ma. What do I want with chemicals?"

"I don't know. She sounded pretty upset."

Peter chuckled. "I wouldn't doubt it," he said. "Old Stark has a fit every time she loses her test tubes. Which is pretty often. You know what the class calls her? Miss Stark Raving Mad. Her problem is she should have retired about a hundred years ago."

Ordinarily she would have laughed along with him. But something was different about her tonight. She continued, in her low, serious tone, "She said one of the students—Jude, I think she called him—said he saw you in the area after school."

"Jude?" Peter's voice cracked. Suddenly he was back on the field, running, keeping a sharp eye out for Traps. He answered coldly. "That creep? He'd turn in his mother if he thought there was anything in it for him."

Still she pursued him. "So you don't know anything about

the chemicals then?"

He was impatient with her. "I told you, no. What's the big deal about a few lousy chemicals, anyway?"

"Ordinarily, nothing. But these, according to Miss Stark, can be used to make explosives."

"Jesus." Peter stood up suddenly. So that was their game. "Like I said, Mom," he said quickly, "she probably put them with her test tubes." He said good night and hurried upstairs.

His mother remained in the living room. She wanted to tell her husband, but tell him what? Peter had mentioned a mine field. That was ridiculous. But if his stories were pure imagination, why the orb? Was it just a variation on the stones—like props for a play? Even if he and his friends were playing a game together, surely it *was* a game. Boys played war games all the time. And anybody could have run off with those chemicals. Peter didn't steal. He made up stories, but that didn't make him a thief. Maybe Miss Stark was a little excitable. Maybe that boy Jude . . .

Late that night, when everyone had gone to bed, she nudged her husband. Somehow, sharing her fears made them seem less formidable. He promised to talk to Peter. At least try.

“Peter!” Mr. Rourke was thumping on the piano so hard the orb teetered over the edge. Peter made a dive for it.

“Watch it, Dad. You nearly broke it.” His tone was childishly accusing.

“You and your toys,” said his father, responding with resentment of his own. He had tried to be patient. But the afternoon had been long and full of error. It gave the upcoming recital all the charm of an apocalypse. “You need more than good luck charms to learn this piece. If you’d spend more time rehearsing and less playing those ridiculous games—” There. He had said it. He regretted it instantly.

“They’re not ridiculous, Dad. No more ridiculous than the ones you used to play. We’re also doing military maneuvers.”

The anger went out of him. He spoke with the quiet bitterness of memory. “You don’t have to play war games to prove your manhood. There are other ways.”

“Like playing the piano?” said Peter, acidly. “There’s no glory in that.”

Mr. Rourke moved his wheelchair forward. It was important to see his son’s face. “The men in my outfit called it ‘hunting

the tiger’s eye,’” he said, a bit of the old Irish creeping into his voice. He went on, grimly. “Nobody I knew ever found it and lived.”

“But, Dad—” Peter was suddenly enthusiastic—“you were great. The stories you used to tell. Out on the battlefield. Dodging B-52’s. Rigging up mines with tin cans and nails. I’ll bet they ran the other way when they saw you coming.”

His father leaned forward, fixing Peter with his sharp green eyes. “Those were only maneuvers,” he said, patiently. “We were too far behind the lines to see any real fighting. We were too isolated. Too raw. It was one big training camp that never got tested. That is, until the rains came. And only then by some hideous foulup.”

“But what were you doing playing the piano?” Peter said, the old reproach creeping into his voice.

His father’s eyes flashed with irritation. He felt his son had never quite forgiven him for not being wounded on the battlefield. “What else is there to do on a rainy Friday night in a village bar?” he replied angrily. “And who could hear bombers with twenty men singing ‘It’s a Long Way’ in the midst of a downpour? Before we realized what it was, it was on top of us. We ran out into the rain like

rats, but it was too late. Bad weather, instrument failure, general hysteria on the pilot's part: it all added up to an honorable discharge. From both professions." He was silent for a moment as if the memory had tired him. Seeing Peter's impatient expression, he smiled wryly. "So much for the tiger's eye," he shrugged, then added, "So much for my brilliant career as a pianist. But I wasn't the only one. It happened over and over. Young men blown apart in maneuvers before the real show even started." His voice became quiet but no less intense as his large pale hands gripped the sides of his wheelchair. "Peter, what we're doing now, this is a game worth playing, a game you don't win by doing in your opposition. This is a game that celebrates life."

Peter seemed distracted, or at least not wholly convinced. "Then how come I don't feel like celebrating?"

His father nodded, seeming to understand. "Maybe you haven't lost enough. You need time to think. Maybe after practice—"

"Dad, I'm already late for my meeting."

His father stiffened. He glanced at the calendar. "Your recital is in three days." Peter looked at his watch as if to say it was this evening, not three

days from now, that concerned him. His father felt suddenly like an intruder. He broke the silence with a plea colored by hurt and anger. "Your reputation as a pianist is at stake here." No response. Again he tried, this time determined to smash, brick by brick, the wall Peter had erected between them. "I have invited personal friends to this performance," he said bitterly. "A standard has been established in this family. A standard which you are invited to uphold."

"Invited?" Peter's voice was savagely quiet. "That implies I was given a choice."

"You were," said his father, withdrawing into a formality more penetrating than rage. "You were given more choices than most. When this recital is over, however, you may abandon your piano playing. I realize, now, how little my assistance has meant."

Peter swiveled around on the bench to face his father. "It's not that, Dad," he said quickly. "I didn't mean—" He searched wildly for an explanation his father would understand, all the while battling against the guilt and anger warring within him. He wanted to stay and fight it out with his father. And he wanted to run. He felt trapped again, outmaneuvered, ashamed. In desperation he

turned to the piano. He struck savagely, with a passion that translated as renewed enthusiasm. Chords exploded, recreating the sunken cathedral in all its ruinous glory. As if in sympathy, the orb blazed golden. "Why can't you always play like that," said his father. The argument was forgotten.

The playing went on, well into the night. Until Jude phoned. "Forget valentines, Peter," he said. "Daryl's father is in hospital. You wouldn't know anything about the latest fireworks at the factory—would you?"

It was a Trap. Peter recognized it. Probably the rest of them were listening in the background, holding their breath, waiting for an incriminating remark. Now it was his move. He forced the anger out of his voice and spoke calmly. "Why should I know anything? You're the one with the chemicals, in spite of what you told Miss Stark."

There was a pause, followed by background noise. "Stark?" The voice was pierced with irony. "You're coming loose at the seams, Peter. I don't even take chemistry." And he hung up.

In the middle of the night, there came a soft, dull thud outside Peter's window. It was enough to wake him. Enough

to remind him that he was still a beginner. While he was sleeping, someone had crept in and stolen the orb. Whatever Jude and the others had started, now with the orb in their possession it was their move.

When he got back to sleep Peter dreamed that he was inside a crypt. And he was falling. Because there was no bottom to this crypt. And he knew at the same time that he was inside something even more threatening. A presence, a power, that encircled even the crypt. A sphere that contained him and watched him and compelled him. It had drawn him towards the pit, pulled him inside and then down. And now he was falling, inside the terrible eye of the orb.

It was the afternoon of the recital. Peter was still struggling with the last few bars.

"Leave it, just leave it!" his father shouted. "If all these weeks of practice haven't hammered it into you, neither will this last minute fumbling. Play it. That's all. Simply and competently. And make an end of it."

Peter tried again without anger or impatience. But even with the performance looming, he found it difficult to concentrate. He kept wondering how

they were going to strike. And when.

The hall began to fill, mostly with relatives of the performers. The parents all sat in the front row. Mrs. Rourke was scanning the program. "Peter's name comes last," she said, smiling. "That must mean he's the best."

Her husband groaned. "Then I predict a long and painful evening."

Mrs. Rourke was still poking and half seriously scolding her husband when the first performer entered, a small, red-faced girl with wobbly knees. In spite of her terror, she played adequately. A poke in the ribs as the little girl bowed reminded Mr. Rourke of his hasty adjudication. Still he looked thoughtful and stern as one by one, the rest of the students subjected themselves to his scrutiny. There was only an odd moment when his face relaxed as he entered the spirit of the recital. He was waiting for that final moment when his son would enter and make his debut, mediocre as it might be. Still, it would be a beginning. For Mr. Rourke, a new beginning. If the boy were not exactly an inspired performer, he was young and, given time and direction, would progress. But, and this he promised himself,

only if his son should choose to.

It was time. Peter went out into the middle of the stage and bowed, peering into the lights. His mother waved. He froze. The pause lasted no more than a second, yet the audience felt the shock. Stage fright, it was generally agreed. Peter's father sensed something deeper. He followed his son's gaze. There in the fourth row—in a group apart—sat Daryl, hands cupping the orb like an offering as the other boys whispered, softly, nervously. Jude was the only one absent.

Peter moved towards the piano, stiffly, like a puppet with glass eyes. The image of his son's face remained in Mr. Rourke's mind: the impression of peril, the panic. Then the playing began. So timid, at first, it was scarcely audible. And then one rich chord sounded, and the real playing began. He made the keys sing. His father wondered what had moved him to play like that, as though his very life depended on it. Never had he sensed such intensity. The idea of the orb recurred and haunted him. Again he saw the boy's hands lifting it—like an offering, like a challenge. When the performance ended, he turned to his wife. "Not a brilliant performance, Alice. But it was inspired. Certainly better than any rehearsal. But why

did his friend have that orb thing with him?"

"Did he? I didn't notice." She was still wiping her eyes. "For luck, I imagine."

"Well, it worked," he said, still not satisfied. "But I thought it was Peter's."

"Oh no. It was on loan. He said it was for some job that wasn't finished yet. He wouldn't tell me any more about it."

Peter came forward for his parting bow. The boys whistled and applauded noisily and then, except for Daryl, left the room. Daryl took Mrs. Rourke aside and spoke a few words to her, privately. She returned to her husband, looking pale and anxious, and told him that he was the boy whose father was in the hospital.

"What does he want?" he responded abruptly.

"He wants to speak to me outside. It's about Peter. Can you wait for me?"

Mr. Rourke was annoyed. "Why can't he speak to you here?"

She paused, a little embarrassed. "He has something to show me. He wouldn't say more . . ." Her voice faded out.

"In front of me?" he demanded.

She kissed his forehead. "I'll just be a minute," she said. And she was gone.

Mr. Rourke sat frowning. Why

was he being excluded? What could they possibly say to or show his wife that couldn't include him? Again he went over what his wife had told him about Peter's most recent experiences: the war games, this glowing orb, the missing chemicals. And most recently, the explosion Daryl's father had been in. For the first time, he tried seriously to understand what game it was that Peter's new friends were teaching him. He stayed, puzzling over the pieces as the cathedral emptied and the sound equipment was carried off and only a thin cord remained: crude, makeshift, running from the piano into the orchestra pit . . . He wheeled himself over casually and peered down into the pit. The pieces were beginning to fit.

Mrs. Rourke found Peter outside the front entrance. She hugged him and slipped her arm through his, proudly, then looked around for the boys. He seemed reluctant to follow her. "Come on, Peter," she said. "I want to show you off." The boys were waving from the far side of the parking lot. Mrs. Rourke and her son went to join them. "Well?" she said, with her arm around Peter. "What did you think of my son's performance?"

Daryl raised the orb, the gold eye of it blazing. "Mrs. Rourke,"

he said, "I'd say it brought the house down."

Mrs. Rourke jumped at the sound that followed. Her hands flew up by instinct to shield her eyes. It was the piano hall. Stained glass splintered like shrapnel, smoke funneled, while the rest of the cathedral lay quiet and stone-stable, as though waiting for a real apocalypse. She went running towards the cathedral. Peter started after her, but a fierce hand gripped his shoulder and swung him around.

"An eye for an eye, Traitor." It was Daryl. The other boys closed in around him.

"For God's sake," cried Peter, struggling against Daryl's grip. "What are you talking about?"

"My father." Peter was now surrounded by five boys, threatening, ape-like. Daryl tightened his grip. "Like Jude said—"

Peter stopped struggling. His whole body went rigid. "You think I was responsible? Because Jude handed you some story to cover himself?"

Daryl's face mirrored his disbelief. "Jude wouldn't—"

Peter broke in, savagely. "Wouldn't he?" He wrenched himself free. "Where is he now, this 'faithful servant' of yours? Right from the start, he played the two of us against each other,

hoping one day we'd cancel each other out. And you never realized. You were breeding your own Traitors."

But they had stopped listening. They were all watching the far side entrance to the cathedral. Peter's mother was pushing a wheelchair towards them, her face filled with love and relief. In front of her, spectacles cracked, face blackened, rigid with fury, rode Peter's father.

"Dad!" cried Peter. He started towards his father, then turned, on an impulse, and snatched the orb out of Daryl's hands. "You lose," he said, raising it high like a trophy. "I get to keep the orb. Every last piece of it." Before Daryl, or anyone, could respond, he brought it down on the pavement, blasting it into a hundred thousand splinters of colorless glass. Out of the bottom dropped a circle of paper—color-wheel painted, fluorescent. Rigged to trap light. The rest was plain glass. The boys looked at Daryl, horrified.

"It's a fake," gasped Peter. "Like everything else in your little club. A fake." The boys scattered like rabbits, leaving Daryl to hurry after them.

"Some tiger's eye," said Peter. He kicked his way through the fragments, defiant and free of them, running, running to meet his father.

FICTION

The Good Listener

by James A. Noble



Illustration by Barbara Roman

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I helped bury Jeremy Irvin a while back. I could claim I did the whole job, but the state assisted me with most of it. That is, what there was of it.

They call it a subsistence funeral around these parts. That's just a fancy way of saying the deceased didn't have any friends or money to handle the burial. I'm not saying Jeremy had any enemies, he just didn't have any real friends to speak of.

He was one of those retired fellows who had nothing particular to do so he hung around the bar a lot. The bar in this case meaning Swart's place, one of those dull little country taverns with half a dozen stools, a bar, and not much else. You know, the kind of place where the owner is the only bartender.

Anyway, Jeremy used to show up just a little before four o'clock, about a half hour before the regulars came in for a beer after they got off work. When they finally started arriving, he'd amble around to one of them and start talking. Didn't matter whether he knew you or not, he just began his idea of a conversation: a monologue.

Once he got started, he'd never stop. Not that that was so bad, it's just that he never had anything to say. It was always about how much he liked the country, or his bad back, or the little shack he rented dirt cheap,

or . . . well, you get the picture. Just the same old boring stuff over and over again, day after day, and always on the same topic: himself. After five years of it, even the most patient person in the world couldn't stand to listen to him.

You could turn away from him or start talking to somebody else, but it didn't help. He'd just stand there and talk at your back or interrupt your conversation. The only way to shut him up for a few minutes was to buy him a drink. Whisky with a water chaser. He'd belt it down, savor the aftertaste, and then be right back jabbering at you again. So you'd buy him another drink and he'd let you alone for a few more minutes. And so on and so on. Eventually he couldn't bother anyone for the rest of the night. In my own words to the wise, "You can't talk somebody's ear off when you're passed out on the bar." A few of the guys who didn't mind buying drinks used that philosophy to get Jeremy off their backs. Consequently, he never stayed sober for long.

Occasionally one of the regulars would get a little hot under the collar and would tell him they had heard it all before and to buzz off. I guess that's when I started feeling a bit sorry for him.

Here he was with a dull past,

never enough money to buy his own drinks, no real friends to talk to, and without any family (although I think he mentioned an invalid sister in Jersey one time). It got me to thinking about my own life. Someday I was going to retire from the warehouse and I hadn't planned on what I was going to do after that. I wondered if I would start hanging around bars looking for someone to tell about the exciting times I'd had putting farm equipment parts in warehouse bins. I knew I'd like to be treated a little more kindly than the way the regulars treated Jeremy. I guess that's when I decided I would try at least to appear interested in what he had to say. Turned out to be a big mistake.

As soon as I began to look like I was listening, he never left me alone. It got so bad I had to employ my "words of wisdom" a couple of times and buy him enough drinks to shut him up. The worst time was when he tried to give me his penknife.

He was smashed and started into his "good buddy" routine, hanging and slobbering all over me, saying I was the only one who ever paid him any attention. He pulled this rusty old penknife out of his pocket and made a big production in front of everybody at the bar about giving it to me. Everyone was

laughing, ribbing me about the "priceless gift." Guess I got a little angry. I took Jeremy outside, gave the knife back to him, and told him never to make a fool of me in front of everybody again. I felt pretty bad about scolding him like that, especially when he got himself killed two weeks later.

Normally Richard Swart, owner of his namesake bar, would load the semiconscious Jeremy into his car after closing and drive him to his shack. It's only about a half mile away. Well, one Tuesday Jeremy got himself good and drunk but never passed out. Instead, just about closing time, he got up and slipped out the door before anyone noticed he was gone. A short distance from his place, he staggered into the road and was hit by a car. Died instantly.

Maybe I was feeling guilty about having lectured him or sorry about his death, I don't know which, but since there was no one to see to his funeral, I decided to try to give him a decent burial. I went down to the morgue, where I was asked to identify the body since they didn't know of any relatives. When I explained Jeremy's situation, they told me about the subsistence funeral the state provided for just such cases as his.

It's a simple affair. There's no

viewing at the undertaker's or any sort of church service. What they do is embalm the body, put it into a sort of fiberglass coffin, and take it to a special graveyard where they bury "those of less fortunate means," as one of the state-authorized undertakers I talked to put it.

At the cemetery, the deceased's friends carry the casket to the burial site where a preacher says a few words, and the whole ceremony is over.

I tried to help out as much as I could. I went over to Jeremy's shack to get some decent clothes to bury him in. Not that it made much difference, since there wouldn't be a viewing, but I couldn't see leaving him in the grubby stuff he normally wore. I was sure Jeremy had left the door unlocked because of an incident involving Richard that happened one winter a couple of years back.

It seems Jeremy had passed out at the bar as usual and Richard had driven him home. When Richard tried to carry him into his shack, he found the door was locked, so he deposited the unconscious body on the doorstep. There was a little precipitation that night and Jeremy woke up the next morning under ten inches of snow. A passing newsboy heard the mound of snow crying for help and rescued him. Ever since

then, Jeremy had never locked his door.

I went into the shack and located a half-clean pair of slacks and a shirt. While I was there, I found a small address book sitting on a cluttered old table. There were only two entries in it. The phone number of Swart's bar and what were apparently the name and address of Jeremy's sister in Jersey. Her name was Emily Irvin, and the address was a nursing home. Since her last name was Irvin, I assumed she, like her brother, had never been married. Kind of made me feel sad.

When I called the nursing home, one of the administrators got on the line and advised me against telling Emily Irvin about her brother's death at the present time. She was in poor health and would probably be unable to stand the shock of the news, let alone attend the funeral. The administrator also informed me that Emily was a ward of the state and couldn't possibly provide any financial assistance for the funeral.

The services were held on the Thursday after his death. I don't think I've ever thought less of my fellow man than I did that day. The only ones to show up besides myself were Richard Swart, a preacher, and the operator of the backhoe that dug the grave.

The four of us carried the casket to the grave, the preacher gave one of the shortest eulogies I think I've ever heard, and the backhoe operator started pushing dirt into the hole before we had left. Such was the funeral of Jeremy Irvin.

I did one thing as a special remembrance of Jeremy. The state normally provides a little cement marker with the deceased's last name on it for the grave, but I thought Jeremy deserved better. I sprang for a small marble headstone and had his whole name plus the dates of his birth and death engraved on it.

I remembered he'd told me something about the date of his birth a couple of times, but I hadn't listened very well, so I had to go to the county seat to get the exact date from their records. At the time, I had no idea what that little trip was going to mean to me.

That Saturday, I picked up the completed headstone and went to the graveyard to set it in place. It looked nice when I got done. I stayed for a while, staring at the headstone and thinking about poor Jeremy, then I drove over to Swart's place for a beer. I had done my good deed for the week.

It was early afternoon and most of the regulars were already there drinking. It seemed

to me that if a lot of them hadn't had their jobs, they'd be in there looking for companionship like Jeremy had. Richard had a small black and white TV playing on a shelf behind the bar, and nearly everyone was staring blankly at the screen. An old rerun western was playing.

Around two o'clock, the movie was interrupted for five minutes for the regularly televised drawing of the weekly lottery number. A few of the fellows who played the lottery got their tickets out and one by one moaned and groaned as the odds took their toll.

When the whole six digit number appeared on the screen, something clicked inside my head. The number was 112908. I knew that number, but I couldn't think of where I had seen it.

Then it struck me. November 29th, 1908. The date of birth on Jeremy's headstone. Suddenly, I remembered something he had told me during one of his endless ramblings at the bar. His date of birth was his lucky number and he picked that number when he bought his lottery ticket every Monday at Ray's general store.

I became very aware of the customers at the bar. Jeremy had told nearly everyone about his lucky number and the lot-

tery ticket he purchased every Monday. I wondered whether any of the regulars remembered or whether any of them had really listened to what Jeremy had said? Judging by their overall lack of reaction, I realized there weren't any good listeners in the crowd... except possibly me.

Jeremy was killed on Tuesday, which meant that if he was true to his habits he had bought a lottery ticket the day before at Raymond's store, and the number on it would be 112908. Legally, I realized, the ticket didn't belong to me. Even if I decided to take it, there were still two problems I had to worry about.

The first was finding the ticket, which I felt confident I could do. The second problem was "Ripoff" Raymond. Ray was the proprietor of the little general store where Jeremy regularly bought his ticket. Raymond got his nickname for his lack of conscience when it came to taking people's money. He even shortchanged the little kids who came into his store to buy nickel candies.

If Jeremy had been going there every Monday for the last several years, buying a lottery ticket with the same number on it, Raymond would be sure to remember, especially if Jeremy kept repeating his little birth-

day-lucky-number story to him, something he was sure to have done. If Raymond knew Jeremy's ticket had won, he'd be out tearing the dead old man's shack apart right now. Still, there was the possibility Raymond wasn't near a television this afternoon and there was perhaps a little time before the lottery commission phoned him the winning number to post. I had to make a decision... but I didn't take long.

I slipped out of the bar unnoticed and headed for Jeremy's shack. I had two numbers rolling around in my brain. One was 112908 and the other was four hundred thousand; the prize amount for the winning ticket. I was going to be rich.

I walked inside the cabin and flicked the light switch; but the electricity must have been turned off. I waited a few minutes until my eyes adjusted to the dim light; then I headed for the clutter on the table and began sifting through it. I found the ticket lying there and was double checking the number on it when I heard a noise behind me and whirled around.

Richard Swart had walked in, holding a revolver. He told me to hand over the ticket if I had found it.

At first, I didn't understand what he meant when he said "if I had found it," since I was

standing right in front of him holding it. Then I realized he couldn't see me clearly. He had just come in from the outside and his eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness. I lunged at him.

I got hold of his wrist and shoved the pistol away, but Richard is a big man and he pushed me down on the floor with him on top. Slowly, he began to overpower my grip on his wrist and swing the gun toward my head. Desperately, I reached up to the table and felt for something to hit him with. What I found was the old penknife Jeremy had once tried to give me. The blade had been left out. The fight was over a second later.

I didn't think one stab wound could kill a man that big, but I was wrong. I convinced myself that I had had to do it in self-defense. I'd just tell the police it was either him or me. They'd understand.

It wouldn't be easy explaining to the police why Richard and I were in Jeremy's place and what we were fighting about. It meant I would have to tell them about the lottery ticket. Since it was Jeremy's, it would probably be passed on to that invalid sister of his in Jersey, and she'd end up with the four hundred thousand dollars.

I tried to tell myself I would have to leave and find a phone

to call the police. My fingerprints, I realized, were on the penknife, so when I took it from Richard's body, wiped it off on his shirt, and slipped it into my pocket, I knew I wasn't going to call anybody.

I drove to the other side of the state to turn in the lottery ticket. I wasn't too concerned about anyone back home finding out I had won all that money, since the lottery commission will protect your anonymity if you request it.

When I got to the room where you turn in the tickets, the woman behind the counter told me the number was correct, it just wasn't for the right week. I stared at the ticket in disbelief. Sure enough, there at the bottom was the drawing date. I had picked up a ticket Jeremy had purchased for a drawing that had already taken place before he was run down.

I felt pretty miserable driving home. I decided to pull over at the first phone booth, call the police, and tell them the whole story. When I finally found one, it was occupied by some woman. As I hung around outside, waiting for her to finish up, I spotted a newspaper in a coin-op rack. Richard Swart's picture was on the front page.

I bought one and read through the article quickly. It stated that Richard Swart had been

found stabbed to death in a vacant house and that the police were investigating. There was no mention of any clues or suspects . . . or a lottery ticket. The police must have turned Jeremy's place upside down looking for clues, so I knew if they hadn't found the winning ticket, it wasn't in the shack.

Everything Jeremy owned had been gone over. No doubt the employees at the morgue went through his personal effects. The police had searched the cabin. No one had found the ticket. I could think of only one place where it could be. It had to be in a pocket of the clothing. I had picked up for his burial.

The lady occupying the phone booth had gone, but I changed my mind about calling the police. Instead I decided to go to the hardware store and invest in a pick and shovel. I never made it. I was stopped about a mile from town, handcuffed, and taken down to the sheriff's office, where I was formally charged with the murder of Richard Swart.

I was pretty sure they didn't have any evidence to convict me so I played it smart and kept my mouth shut. I was counting on getting off, lying low for a couple of days, and then doing a little midnight grave raiding. Unfortunately for me, the trial went badly.

First, the prosecutor introduced the penknife they had found in my pocket. There were several flakes of dried blood under the hinge, which matched the victim's type. A police coroner stated emphatically that the stab wound in Richard's body was made by the knife. Several of the regular patrons from Swart's bar testified they had seen Jeremy give it to me.

Some of Swart's customers stated that Richard left the bar on the afternoon of the murder, leaving one of the regulars, Cloony, in charge. Not totally trusting Cloony, Swart emptied the cash register into his jacket pocket before he left. The money was not found on the body when the police arrived at Jeremy's shack. None of the regulars could say with any certainty that I was at the bar when Richard left, but most believed I was and had gone a short time later.

Then "Ripoff" Raymond got up and testified. He told the court he had seen me coming out of Jeremy's shack that afternoon and went in to investigate after I had left. That's when he discovered the body and called the police. I knew why Raymond must have been hanging around the shack. He had found out the lottery number and was there to steal the ticket.

Needless to say, Raymond's

testimony really hurt. I started to panic. When I got my chance in the witness chair, I tried to tell them how I had given the knife back to Jeremy and found it on the table later. I explained that Swart had attacked me with a gun and I was just trying to defend myself. When the prosecutor asked me why I was at Jeremy's shack in the first place, I lied and told him I was just collecting a few of Jeremy's things to send to his sister in Jersey. I didn't think the court would look too kindly on me if I told them I was trying to steal a dead old man's lottery ticket. Besides, there was still the four hundred grand to think of.

The prosecuting attorney tore me to pieces in his summation. He said I had been at the bar when Swart left with the money. That I followed him out, killed him, took the money, and then hid the body in Jeremy's shack. Worst of all, he told the jury the police didn't find Richard's gun at the murder scene.

I guess I lost control about that time. I stood up and started yelling for them to check Ripoff. I told them he must have taken the gun. I might have become a little too physical as well because I was slapped with a contempt charge and forcibly removed from the courtroom.

I knew things were looking bad when the jury only took an

hour to deliberate. I was pronounced guilty of murder in the first degree. The trial had gone so poorly that I was sure I was going to get a life term, but I didn't. I was sentenced to death in the electric chair.

About a week before my execution, I was visited by a lawyer. He started saying something about how kind and friendly I had been to Jeremy and how Jeremy had left a will and I was named as sole beneficiary. The lawyer wanted to know why I looked so surprised, since Jeremy had told him that he had informed me about the will. I guess it was one of those times at the bar when I wasn't listening too good.

The lawyer handed me a wallet and told me it was all that remained of Jeremy's possessions after the bills were paid. He left and I sat there for an hour looking at the wallet and turning it over in my hands before I opened it.

Yeah, the lottery ticket was there, all folded up and jammed down in one of the corner pockets. The same ticket that I had tried to steal and had killed for . . . and I would have gotten it through Jeremy's will anyway. I was in a lot of trouble for no reason.

I suppose I could have tried to show the ticket to the state's attorney, but what good would

it have done? I knew a winning lottery ticket wasn't going to convince anyone I was innocent of the murder.

I requested an envelope, a stamp, and a pen and mailed the ticket to Emily Irvin at the nursing home. It was funny how I remembered the address, even the zip code.

The week went by slowly. The day before my execution, a guard—his name was Clarence—brought the envelope back. It had been rubber stamped with the notation "RETURN TO SENDER. ADDRESSEE DECEASED."

Before Clarence got out of earshot, I called him back and gave him the ticket. I told him it was worth a few bucks.

My lawyer showed up about an hour later with a big grin on his face. Bad enough this guy lost my case, he was smiling with less than twenty hours to go before I was to be toasted. But I was soon smiling, too, when he told me I had been granted a stay and a retrial. Ripoff had come forward with the stolen money, the gun, and a new story about witnessing Swart's attack on me through a crack in the shanty wall. Old Ripoff had a conscience after all.

Three weeks later, Ripoff was in the slammer for perjury and

I was a free man out looking for my old buddy Clarence. I figured if I kept my cool and reasoned with him, I could hit him up for about half the winnings.

I had been told he usually hung around a little bar on the west side. When I saw the big Rolls parked in front of the place, I knew I had found him. Seeing as how he had already spent some of the money, I decided to reduce my request to a hundred thousand.

Inside, I spotted Clarence right off. He was the one wearing the custom tailored pinstriped suit and surrounded by a half dozen young lovelies. I meandered over.

He recognized me and offered his congratulations on my success in the second trial. We made small talk for a few minutes before I got around to explaining my main reason for being there. He remained calm while I went through the logic of why he should share his good fortune with me. I figured I was presenting a pretty good case for myself until I drew a bead on his eyes. He was glancing this way and that, sipping his beer, winking at one of the girls. . . . He wasn't even listening to me.

I turned to the bar and realized he had bought me a drink. Whisky with a water chaser.

FICTION



The Finishing Touch

by Barbara
Ninde Byfield

Illustration by Barbara Ninde Byfield

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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

“**T**hat scar on your arm is from his throwing the kitten out the window?”

“Yes.” Jessica’s face was quiet and, her sister thought, the color of bleached stone. Her left forearm carried a badly healed slash, white and puckered; her thin steely hands continued quietly repairing an electric pump from the garden fountain. The table between them was littered with wire, insulated line, small parts, pliers. “He’d come home and told me he was leaving for good, about four months ago—when I wrote you—he said he was fed up, bored to death with twenty-seven years of living with someone who had ‘a body like a broomstick and the soul of a prison warden’—I don’t think I wrote you that—he was going to ‘live,’ needed his space, whatever that means. We were in the bedroom, he was throwing things in suitcases and of course the kitten thought it was all great fun. She was pouncing on socks, sweaters, and then started kneading her claws into the satin lapels of his new dinner jacket. He was furious, just scooped her up, kicked out the window glass, and threw her out.”

“Oh, Jess, how perfectly ghastly! Two stories down—the tiny thing!” Lois whispered, the

coffee cup in her hands shaking.

“Yes, and nothing but the firethorn hedge below. She got her claws into the edge of the window box for a minute, I reached out for her and ripped my arm open on a shard of glass in the sash. She was bleeding, too, and hysterical, clawed me, lost hold and fell into the hedge—I don’t know why I didn’t murder Stuart, he wasn’t even very drunk, just angry about his lapels. I ran down and finally got her out of the thorns, her eye was bleeding, the car looked like a slaughterhouse by the time we got to the vet, she and I. When I got back, he’d gone. He hasn’t been back since, and I haven’t had to see him, either. Thank God for lawyers.”

“How utterly depraved can a person get?” Lois stroked the young cat in her lap. It stared at her peacefully with one bright eye, the other closed in a quizzical pucker forever; but it purred richly. “I must say, when you wrote me you were divorcing I wasn’t really surprised, or sorry. How you managed all these years with his strings of girlfriends, that awful woman scandalizing everyone when he wouldn’t pay blackmail, those vacations shooting polar bears from helicopters, cock fights in Mexico, big boozy parties. I used to wince for you every time

you said you and Stuart were off for Las Vegas or Nassau for a few days."

"So did I." A spark jumped, crackled, from a wire she was holding. "Damn, there's something else wrong in this thing. I knew there was. Well, it was guilt, I suppose, not being able to have children. After all, Stuart was constant, if not faithful, and maybe he wouldn't have turned to—brutality, excess, if—well, I'll never know."

"A kid or two wouldn't have made the slightest difference. Not if he had that in him to begin with. The first time it cried, he'd have bitten it through the back of its neck. He was always out for his own comfort and convenience and nobody else's. Well, if this poor kitten wasn't the last straw, I think this letter from his decorator is. How dare he? I notice he didn't have the guts to ask you himself, by the way. You said he's off to the South Seas or whatever with those twin figure skaters from the Ice Follies. Twins, I ask you! Leaving his new house for the decorator to finish off. I hope you didn't let Stuart have anything from here?"

"No, and to be fair, he didn't ask—except for his guns and fishing tackle, things like that, and his old lounge chair for his back trouble. Of course The Birches was always mine.

Grandfather saw to that long before I met Stuart—by the way, I've seen to my will and it'll go to your boys when I die—but I would have shared some of the things he and I collected together if he'd wanted. He's been in an apartment hotel, but he's bought a townhouse on Park Square. I suppose he missed fireplaces and a garden—well, as you see, he just wants the decorator to look around here and 'sense the ambience.' " Jess detached a piece of corroded pipe from the pump and tossed the letter back across the table. Lois shoved her glasses up on her nose and began to read again.

"Tinsley Interiors. Humph. Sounds like an appointment at a doctor's office to me. 'Mr. Rowan hopes you are amenable—visiting his former home—particular charm and originality you created—hopes I will be able to reproduce in feeling, and in detail where possible, in his new residence—since Mr. Rowan is returning in six weeks, I would be grateful for an early appointment—looking forward to the stimulus and challenge—Thomas Y. Tinsley.' You're *not* going to let him, are you, Jess? 'I enclose a copy of a list of particularly favorite pieces Mr. Rowan hopes I can duplicate.' The gall!"

"Yes, it does rankle. What Stuart's really letting me know is that he wants The Birches but without *me* in it." She snipped off a strand of copper wire viciously. "Since he can't have that, even with all his money—thank heaven for Grandfather, I've still got more than he does—yes, this Tinsley is sort of the last straw; I thought the poor kitten was, but apparently not. Feelings die hard. I don't know about Tinsley, I wish I could think of some sane and healthy reason to say no, but I can't. Might as well be generous."

Lois stubbed out her cigarette and stood up, putting the cat on her chair. "Well, do what makes you feel good, and it'll be the right thing. But the kitty here—the bastard! Listen, Jess darling, I'm glad I stopped and broke my trip even for a day, I wish I could have come earlier. But I have an idea. You know I've got three stinking weeks on the Coast starting tomorrow, but when that's over, let's meet down in Dallas at the Greenhouse for a week of sheer self-indulgence. We'll get all steamed and dieted and massaged and buy ourselves blind at Neiman's. It all costs the earth, but what the hell; let's have a treat."

"Lois, what a fantastic idea! I know I could use it, I've turned

into an awful frump, mooching around too much in this horrible old bathrobe. We'll do it, and come home by way of New York; I'll get a suite at the Carlyle and we can hit the auctions at Christie's and all those junk places on Third Avenue—this sunporch needs doing up, it's gotten so shabby without my noticing." Her seamed, careworn face relaxed for a moment, and she ran a hand through her untidy hair, which was in need of a shampoo.

"You might even treat yourself to a new garden pump, you know."

"Don't tease, sis, you know I've always liked tinkering with things. It soothes me." She laid her unbrushed head on her sister's shoulder. "Oh, Lois, I do hope *something's* going to be the last straw and things won't go on hurting so much—Stuart had one of our 'close friends' tell me the ice skaters he took with him yesterday, the twins, are sister and *brother*, not even two *girls*—good God, middle-aged men! It's all so disgusting."

Thomas Y. Tinsley wished he had been able to maneuver Mrs. Rowan into changing the appointment "to view" as she had put it, as if he were to call on a laid-out corpse in a funeral parlor, to some time during the day in-

stead of evening. He would have liked a full grasp of the exterior of The Birches, now only a dark shape in the moonless night. He would lean conversationally on the lovely gardens that must surround the house, and perhaps, if she were charmable, he would be invited to return.

The spotlight pink flamingoes and plaster trolls peeking out from under polychrome mushrooms suffered a spray of gravel as Tinsley braked too suddenly by the front door. He had feared the worst, and this worst was much, much worse than his doubts when he had met with Stuart Rowan at the fine old brick townhouse ten days ago. *That* "worst" had been that Rowan wanted only a buyer rather than a decorator, meaning hours of non-creative tedium for Tinsley. But the commission would be the same, the budget was lavish, and Tinsley Interiors was in need. He hadn't dared fear it would be as bad as pink flamingoes and all they implied.

The figleaf doorknocker—and what lay under the figleaf when he lifted it—was most assuredly another bit of bad news, as was the suit of armor in the hall, so fake it hadn't the courtesy to bear even a dab of rust. Nor did Mrs. Rowan herself inspire confidence, although she smiled sweetly from her day-

glo pink mouth and twinkled from her violet mascaraed eyes, shaking blonde waves and curls dusted with gold powder at him as she led him from the foyer in silver matador pants and a floozy blouse into what he would always think of as the Ultimate Horror Show.

An hour later his affronted sensibilities, outraged aesthetics, and falling arches—as well as a lack of further film for his camera—forced him to perch on the edge of a painfully glass-beaded love seat in the living room.

"Now, something to drink, Mr. Tinsley?"

"Kitsch," he croaked dustily. "Please?"

"Er, *kirsch*, kirschwasser, if you have it, sorry. On the rocks." He would have preferred hemlock. She did have kirsch, and took crème de menthe for herself, matching the color of her toenails peeping through clear plastic mules.

"Well, I see from Stuart's little list—so good of you to send me a copy ahead of time, I confess our divorce was so bewildering I couldn't have told you what he liked and what he didn't I was so upset. But I think you've seen just about everything now, you did photograph the dolls? Aren't they adorable?" Tinsley had assumed from Rowan's hastily

scrawled list that "K. dolls" could only be kachinas from the Navajos, but eight horrible celluloid simperers in ruffles and red rouge, google-eyed in eight separate glass vitrines, leered at him from the mantelpiece. "Genuine Kewpies; Stuart once said there was even a club of collectors now, so they must be very rare."

"Very. But the pièce de résistance is, of course, your bedroom. Simply—*masterful*, Mrs. Rowan!" What else could he say? She had led him directly from the foyer up thickly carpeted stairs to the bedroom; for a moment he had thought he was in a fun house because of the numerous large pink glass mirrors in gold frames hung from floor to ceiling, reflecting them both in a dizzying confusion of images; he clung visually to the bed itself, which was of little help since he was nearly blinded by the excrescence of gold leaf, bronze, mother-of-pearl, fruitwood, brass that nearly filled the room, and on top of it all, the bedstead was heart-shaped. "Now here," she offered as she turned up hidden pink lighting, "I had the carpet dyed chartreuse to match the bedspread's satin, it was the only way to pull it all together." And he had nodded as approvingly as he could manage, aiming his camera wildly and

hoping the flashbulbs added verisimilitude to his feigned enthusiasm: "It's just a real romantic room. Stuart loved it when the fire was going—he's allergic to open fires, I'm sure he told you, so we have electric logs all over the house." A merry little glow (pink, of course) from the recesses of a salmon marble fireplace answered the flick of a switch.

Downing camera, he looked up from Rowan's list with some puzzlement. "Bed curtains, I think he wrote bed curtains?" Odd, there were no posts on the bed, the only adornment it lacked at all.

"Bed curtains?" She peered at arm's length at her own list. "Oh, dear, his awful scribble! It's *bead* curtains, Mr. Tinsley, they're mostly downstairs, he collected them for years, everywhere, plastic, bamboo, seeds, there's one of coffee beans, and another real treasure of shells. If you're finished here, come downstairs and I'll show you."

He shuddered at the large, glistening Buddha on the landing as he followed her, tripping on the ankle deep shag carpet everywhere as her glittering fingers tinkled strung turkey bones, or their equivalent, hanging from a dark arch. "Just like wind chimes, aren't they? Now, here's the 'fun room' down the hall, he never would let me

find anything to cover this old linoleum, he says it's 'battle-ship gray' and reminds him of his time in the Marines in Korea, he loved it." The linoleum almost soothed Tinsley as he recklessly photographed a baby grand piano entirely covered in blue glass mirrored panels; the pinball machine and jukebox posed no problems, they were easily found these days, and his upholsterer, God love him, could duplicate the horse-shoe-shaped bar padded in black leather, although the prim old man would certainly balk at using de-lidded toilet seats on tripods for the bar stools. "Stuart does *love* puns, those seats used to embarrass me, but all our friends admit they are comfortable!"

"How very witty!" Flash, flash went the camera in time to a dozen cuckoo clocks of assorted sizes, their works grinding with the screaming of the hour.

"And of course he just adored the dining room—everyone does—" he followed her through more bead curtains, tangling a cufflink as she turned up a dimmer switch. "He loved the lights on high, very bright, in here. Tell me, Mr. Tinsley, I never have known exactly what period this furniture is—perhaps Beidermeyer?"

"Transitional." Tinsley had answered firmly. It was his

sure-fire response when something was either unidentifiable, unfamiliar, or ugly, and the Rowan dining room was all three, Prague Lugubrious at best and, unfortunately, easily available. His only consolation was that the sideboards, silver, and chairs were even more vulgar than the brightly varnished and tortuously scrolled table.

Now the heart-shaped ice cubes in his kirsch were tinkling against the bottom of the glass, and he felt revived enough to rise from his perch, giving a little papier-mâché chair next to it a pat. It was a rather sweet chair, papier-mâché had a pixy charm of its own, but it couldn't survive in a room as full of expensive schlock as this. "You're sure you've photographed the coffee table, Mr. Tinsley? Then I'll just close this end—Stuart thought it was so amusing, but I confess even after all these years I've never gotten used to it." The "cof. tble." on Rowan's list functioned as such, but it was originally an old coffin, its half-top opened to display a stuffed crocodile in repose on the tattered pink satin lining. Lit from within, of course. On the wall behind the couch (a symphony in wicker, cut velvet, and tassels which he hoped to forget very soon), three Gustav Max portraits of candybox blondes at the turn of the cen-

tury smirked, larger than life, from ornate gilt frames.

"Now, Mr. Tinsley, the last thing on his list is important. It's out in the garage; I'm so glad you came in a station wagon. It's his lounge chair, you've seen how tall Stuart is. Well, ever since Korea he's had a little upper back trouble, just gets all kinked up for no reason at all. We had this chair made for him years ago, one that really fits him—goodness, the factory sent a man for *three* fittings before they got it right!—it was the placement of the massage unit that was so difficult. It's been off being reupholstered, and I had them just leave it in the garage the other day, I'm off on a little vacation in a day or two, so this is your last chance. I'm sure we can get it into your car. I'm *very* strong, you'd be surprised. Don't trip on the cord now."

Tinsley was past being surprised at anything, including the vivid tigerskin plush on the chair, or Mrs. Rowan's expertise at moving and lifting furniture. The lounge did fit, barely, into his car, and although he lost a button from his blazer and broke a temple piece on his glasses, Mrs. Rowan emerged from the heaving and shoving unruffled, except that her blouse had shifted from one scrawny shoulder to the other.

He made his farewell and thanks just short of his standard invitation to potential clients: "And if I can do anything to help you with . . ." There was no help for The Birches anyone could give, beyond setting a match to it, none at all.

Tinsley's only consolation was that the wax museum he had just left was very, very expensive, and a "similar ambience" would cost Mr. Rowan and his eight empty rooms very, very big bucks. No matter how dreadful, Tinsley would earn his percentage and fee as if he were duplicating the tasteful and aristocratic home he had expected. In short, Tinsley would mop up a small fortune and, given the state of his "Interiors," just in time.

Jessica needed all her self-control to wait until Tinsley's car turned from the long tree-lined driveway of The Birches onto the main road; she breathed deeply and, plucking the lightly attached figleaf doorknocker from its temporary hook, put it on the shoulder of the suit of armor and closed the front door behind her. She raced up the long staircase, tripping once on the unfamiliar shag carpeting, banged her bedroom door shut against the aesthetic enemies—after all, that was unfair, they had served

as friends for an hour or so, but still—enemies in her house.

Her bedroom was not the one she had shown Tinsley, the great horror of the heart-shaped bed found only at the last minute and at great expense at Sweet Dreams Sleeping Suites! Warehouse Sale!, and plunked down in a never-furnished room once, long ago, intended for a nursery or playroom. The rented mirrors from her hairdresser, whose salon was closed for vacation, had been easy, and the other things—well, her own resources had surprised her.

Ripping off the blouse, padded brassiere underneath, silver pants, and plastic mules, she balled them into a large wad for the trash. Not waiting for the water to run warm, she gasped under the shower, rinsing the teased and twisted and gold-dusted curls out and away and down the drain, towelling her own ash blonde and silver hair free of disfigurement. The tangerine lipstick left a stain on her linen face towel, but if it never came out it had all been worth it. Her pajamas and Viyella robe felt like heaven, and she wiggled her bare toes on the bathroom's little Aubusson carpet, faded a hundred years ago into a soft old rose that matched the Toile de Jouy print on the walls, showercurtain, windows.

Her bedroom—and Stuart's,

once—overlooked the garden; but earlier she had pulled the fragile café au lait velvet drapes to shut out the night; the same velvet, rubbed, old, serene, with insertions of silver-gilt braid in simple panels, hung from the posts of the classic antique bed of mild mahogany, the velvet of the spread faded beautifully to a lighter cappucino color. She and Stuart had found the hangings in Venice on their honeymoon a long, long time ago. The fire behind the delicate screen had burned low and Jessica added another log; she was oddly exhausted but strung up like a wire at the same time; she would sit and listen to Scriabin for a time, have a highball.

And Cliff's Moving and Storage truck would be outside at eight in the morning; a hefty check in advance had guaranteed that. Her own efficiency would coordinate the swift and careful removal of each ghastly piece, installed this afternoon for Tinsley, back to its origin, and the origins were many: The Crutcheon Little Theater props department (she was a sponsor), Wee Wonders Thrift Shop (again, a sponsor), Museum of the Twentieth Century (she was on the board), the Tudor Roadhouse Bar and Grill, Velma's Beauty Salon, the Burmeister Gallery of Fine Art and Other Gifts, TicToc Clocks and Lamps,

many, many others, and best of all, the rolls and rolls of ghastly carpeting back to Flying Carpets. They had been a little stubborn about only renting her the carpet for a week, but after all, she did own the entire mall their building was in and they were re-negotiating their lease just now. Perhaps tomorrow she would add up what the whole caper had cost but she didn't really care, it had all been fun in a perverse way, perhaps even a vicious way; nevertheless, it was the first fun she had had for a very long time.

Her own things were in the attic, or in Cliff's truck—the great black piano, the irreplaceable Queen Anne dining room things, the lowboys, chairs, tables, most of the drawing room furnishings. The Eakins, Whistlers, the Mary Cassat, were in the attic with the beautiful old carriage clocks found over the years that would go back to the mantelpiece with the Monet re-hung behind them. Even for a day she had missed the paintings, and the jewel-like Vuillard by the bed had been her strength during the upheaval. The kachinas and baskets, fetish bowls and Navajo rugs were in the downstairs closets, it would take only a few minutes to put them back on the sunporch after Cliff had taken away the ghastly

plastic plant forest to K-Mart and brought back her own elegant aurelias, ficus reticulatas and benjamins, all her orchids from the florist who was keeping them.

The taut muscles in her shoulders were relaxing, from the fire and brandy. Once all the horrors were out of the house, the cleaners and their vacuums were coming, she'd told them eleven, after the carpeting was gone; they would also help lay the Bokharas, the great Tabriz and the two Kermans, the Chinese silk in the dining room where the parquet floor would glow its honey border beyond the carpet's glory. Had she remembered to tell Cliff to bring an electrician? She didn't really want to unwind, disconnect, the hideous lighting fixtures she had put up this week, and re-install her own, it was time to let others help her. She had thought to have enough beer in the fridge, though; moving and vacuuming were dusty work and she was always considerate of her help. Which, she thought with a comfortable yawn, is why I have help these days when so few do. Before her Swiss couple came back from the surprise Florida vacation she had sent them on, she would freshen up the servants' sitting room: that gray linoleum needed more than

the dull hooked rugs she'd thrown away. She'd honor Louise and Franz's admiration for the horrible table and chairs her great-grandmother had bought for the staff and which Jess herself had shifted to the dining room for the moment, but now she would put in some decent carpeting and new curtains. She'd also have Cliff leave behind the fifty-inch television screen, they'd love to boast about that all over the country. Yes, I'm considerate, good to them, why not, she thought.

I was considerate and good to Stuart, too, but—a log smoldered, burst to a blaze, and as she leaned forward to brush a live spark back behind the screen, she felt the ripple of the long scar on her arm and seemed to hear a tiny, shrill screaming, breaking glass. The kitten.

And the painful memories of a thousand other wrongs inflicted on her, received by her for over half a century and more faded and sank into ash; although the kitten was curled beside her now in the low, soft chair, purring, the presence of their scars and the memory of their cause blazed from the embers, and that blaze sufficed.

Stuart Rowan wadded the last of his foreign money and punched it into the chauffeur's hand; the guy

didn't notice in the dark street it wasn't dollars, and struggled up the dimly lit stoop with two loads of heavy luggage without complaint or comment. He tipped his hat to Stuart and drove the limousine quietly away; Stuart smiled to himself (he'd probably given the sap all of ninety-five cents) and pulled out the keys to his new house.

God, his back was giving him hell again. It'd been a long flight from Australia and he should have taken a stop or two along the way, but he'd been tired of pleasure and change, wanted suddenly and irrevocably to get home. Home would be a fresh kick. He got the new brass key into the lock in spite of the dim light over the stoop. He must be getting older; a year ago he'd have brought along with him that stewardess who'd been eyeing him on the flight from New York, gotten her into bed as she was asking for, but he'd left her in the rain at the airport, standing in line for the bus. To hell with it. Those figure skaters hadn't been such a great idea after all, expensive as hell and lazy in bed; he'd gotten rid of them in Bali, where they were probably still working off the luxury hotel bill he'd stuck them with. Plenty of other, and cheaper, sport in bed and out of it for the rest of the trip, like that pig-sticking in Bor-

neo—one day he'd go back for more of that, for sure.

He froze, his hand on the foyer light switch. A jeering, insane flight of birds seemed to have exploded in his eardrums, cuckoocuckoocuckoo in treble, supported by grinding gears, chains, weights, cuckoocuckoo and on, all of them announcing midnight in impeccable synchronization. He flicked the switch in terror, the stained-glass chandelier threw orange and blue light into the front room where an electric birch log blazed in an ochre painted fireplace. He ignored a lurking dark shadow in the foyer, he had a sick feeling it was a cigar store Indian but there'd be time for that later, and strode into the long double drawing room, flicking on more lights.

OH MY GOD!

A rump-sprung couch made of tortured staghorns and filled with cushions covered in cabage-rosé chintz faced the fire; in front of it a metal horse trough with a rough iron pump attached to one end glowed; he peered into the glass cover to find a four foot long china mermaid immersed in a bed of pearls, watery bubbles coming out of her breasts and fins. Gold striped ruffled curtains and swags on all the windows, the baby grand piano he had chosen before he left—he peered at the

keys, struck a chord, it *was* the same—had been upholstered top to bottom in mustard plush and fringe. An enormous fresh floral arrangement sat on top, in a granite-ware chamber pot. He tore off the note attached to it. From Tinsley.

"Dear Mr. Rowan—Welcome home—as much like The Birches as possible, with a few touches here and there for amusement or where exact duplication was not practical—some difficulty re-assembling the copy of the Marines at Iwo Jima in the garden, but I count it a particularly lucky find and worth the effort, as it gives a strong focal point from the french doors in the back drawing room. Mrs. Rowan was extremely helpful—permitted photographs for my reference, which I enclose—"

The bitch. Jess. The bitch. Jess reflected in whorehouse mirrors, Jess with the hair of a cocktail waitress, falsies, gaudy necklace, but that long Nefertiti profile and neck were unmistakably Jess, smiling confidently at a glitzy bedstead—

The smell of the whole house as he tore up the stairs, stripping his coat and flinging it down the stairwell, reeked of new, synthetic, shining shag carpeting in sickening lavender stripes. Sickening, but not as much as the master bedroom in

the rear: *it* was draped in lace from the mirrored ceiling to the floor throughout, the bed a lesser version of the one in the photographs but raised on a dais of scalloped seashells, and even without that it was a coarse outrage, covered with tufted pea green satin. A fresh rose—one of Tinsley's "touches," no doubt—dangled from the beak of a stuffed green parrot perched within an elaborate brass art nouveau cage and stand. Beyond the archway to the bath, a ten foot Steiff teddy bear smiled at him, seated on the edge of the hot tub with one foot in an enormous rubber boot dangling in the water.

Groaning, he backed away and turned down the hall to the library. The noble bow windows he remembered were hidden by ropes and swags and falls of bead curtains twinkling in light from the mirrored glass ball revolving on the ceiling. There was not a bookshelf nor a book, but the two cool, classic niches on either side of the fireplace were filled with Kewpie dolls, which more than held their own against the Warhol blowups of Elvis, Marilyn, Judy covering the remaining walls. For a moment he wanted to be sick on the green felt of the pool table but instead grabbed a decanter of whisky from a bar that belonged in a saloon by the rail-

road tracks and drank directly from the heavy crystal.

He choked for a moment as a familiar silhouette in the corner caught his eye, the first familiar shape or object he had seen since he crossed the front threshold. It was his old lounge, his beloved old lounge, but it had been stripped of the beautiful taupe suede upholstery and refitted with tiger-striped plush. It was the last straw. The very last straw.

The bitch, the godawful bitch. What contempt she had for him after all, it showed in all the photographs he unclutched and spread out on the pool table—it was *The Birches* all right, but vulgarized beyond belief. He sank into the lounge, shaking with adrenaline, lay back gasping. Unthinkingly, from old habit, he let his hand fall on the hidden switch to the massage motor built into the back, placed exactly where his shoulder blades would fit, where his muscles seized in painful spasm. As the deadly overload of electricity Jess had, with her mechanical ingenuity and experience, organized to surge through him delivered her very last message, he leaped, crackled, sizzled, and slumped, still frying, back down onto the chair where he would never have a kinky back, or kinks of any kind, forever after.

UNSOLVED

by George J. Summers

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the July issue.

Alan, Bart, Clay, and Dick competed in a race where each man finished in a different position. The four men, notorious liars, reported the results of the race as follows:

- ALAN: 1. I came in just before Bart.
2. I did not come in first.
BART: 3. I came in just before Clay.
4. I did not come in second.
CLAY: 5. I came in just before Dick.
6. I did not come in third.
DICK: 7. I came in just before Alan.
8. I did not come in last.

- I. Only two of the above statements were true.
II. The man who won the race made at least one true statement.

Which one of the four men won the race?

See page 136 for the solution to the May puzzle.

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FICTION

MIRAGE

by Kenneth
Gavrell



Illustration by Eric Marcus

It was about the last place in the world where you'd want to run out of gas. During the past hour we'd covered almost seventy miles and seen absolutely nothing except fir trees, lakes and rivers, swampy bogs, moose crossing signs, and one black bear that was off the road and into the brush before Jim could dig out his camera.

The Canadians called the area the James Bay Frontier, the Arctic watershed where all rivers flowed north. And the last town we'd seen, Longlac, looked like an American frontier town of the 1800's fallen on hard times. According to our map, the next town was Hearst, a hundred and twenty-three miles east of Longlac.

So what was a suntanned San Juanite like me doing in the northern wilderness? A month back, an old army buddy, Jim Chesbro, had called from New York to invite me on a fishing trip. Fishing! I hadn't been fishing in over twenty years. But Jim gave a glowing, wide-screen account of his previous trip to a camp at Sioux Narrows—big and plentiful northerns, beer-can-crunching bass, walleyes running over three pounds. The temptation was too great, and I had nothing pressing, so I flew up to New York and we drove Jim's car out. It was a fine week—about three hundred fish, of which we kept and ate

two—and being on the lake in a sixteen foot motorboat with nothing to think about but casting a spoon against the weeds was just what I had needed. We fished, we ate hamburgers, we drank beer, and we slept like dead men. Now we were on our way home.

Jim had suggested we return via Canada; it would be more interesting than Interstate 80. From what I'd seen on the trip out, playing pickup-sticks with my grandmother would be more interesting than Interstate 80, so I agreed. At Nipigon, we'd had a choice of the northern route 11 or the southern 17 along the shore of Lake Superior—the mileage was about the same. Jim opted for the northern route as being "less crowded," and I agreed again.

Less crowded it certainly was. A major east-west highway with only one lane in either direction; it didn't need any more because we hadn't seen five vehicles in the past hour. Not a house, not a farm, not a store or a gas station—not even electric lines. Nothing. I was beginning to think that there might be some virtue in "crowded."

The weather didn't help any: heavy overcast, rain, thickish fog in some stretches. Cool, grey, and miserable. At Sioux Narrows the nights had been downright cold, and this in mid June. Quite a change from

Puerto Rico. This was only my second time in maple leaf country; the first time had been in connection with a missing person case.

"In a few days you'll be back at your detecting," Jim said.

For some reason he found my business slightly humorous, if not unreal.

"And you at your engineering," I said. "It's a damn good thing we gassed up at Longlac."

"This straight, empty road puts you to sleep," Jim said. "You take over for a while."

"All right." He pulled over and I walked around to the driver's side. The ubiquitous flies and mosquitoes swarmed at me. I'd never seen as many insects as in northern Canada. They lapped up repellent like ice cream.

I jumped in, adjusted the seat and the rear view mirror, and slapped at the fifty bugs that had come in with me. The Olds hummed off down the road, a bigger, more comfortable car than my compact Japanese. My left foot kept reaching for a non-existent clutch pedal.

Ten minutes more of grey rain before Jim said: "What's that up ahead?"

"Where? I don't see anything."

"Up on the right side, off the road."

He was right: there was something moving. "Maybe

another bear," I suggested.

But it wasn't a bear; it was a man, walking slowly along the turf between the asphalt and the line of woods.

"What in the hell is he doing up here?" Jim said. "You'd better slow down."

I slowed down as we neared him. He glanced at us, but made no sign for us to stop. In fact he turned away and kept walking.

"He must have a house near here," I offered.

"Well, if he does, it's up ahead."

"He's not dressed for the rain."

"He's not dressed for the woods either. Looks like a city type."

"Then he must have a car nearby. Maybe he got out to pick flowers."

"I don't see any car," Jim said.

"Then he flew here by flapping his arms," I said. And that or something like it must have been the truth because we didn't see any car or truck or helicopter or house or anything for miles and miles until we approached the vicinity of Hearst. By then the lone man in the rain was already filed away among the trivia of memory. Perhaps he'd been a mirage.

Kapuskasing, the town where we stopped for the night, looked prosperous and growing. It had trains, a pretty river, a shop-

ping mall, a bunch of motels, a Lions Club, and even its own McDonalds. At ten fifteen it was still daylight. I picked up copies of a couple of papers to read while I waited for the sun to take a rest.

On the front page of the first paper was a headline that read NORTH STAR MINING ROBBERY and underneath it were photos of two men, one of whom looked familiar. I passed the paper to Jim. "Recognize either of these guys?"

He stuck on his reading glasses. "Sure, the one on the left is the guy we saw on the road. Jesus, what is this?"

What it was was an account of how half a million dollars and change had disappeared from the company vault early that morning. It had been stored there overnight en route to their executive offices in Toronto. Only a few company employees had known about the money, and two of them had disappeared when the money had. One was a security guard named Ray Mosi, the other—the familiar face—was the local office manager named Arthur Jennings. Jennings was one of the company's most trusted employees and had worked for North Star sixteen years. He had had the combination to the vault.

Jennings' picture was a dead ringer for the man we'd seen:

tall, trim, blond-haired, with a long nose and chin. He was in his late thirties. The other man, Mosi, was younger, stockier, with dark hair and a mustache. His nose looked as if it might have been broken. He didn't look too bright.

The manager of the motel gave us directions to the nearest Ontario Province Police office, and fifteen minutes later we were giving our information to two uniformed types, one of whom, very young, jotted on a pad.

"We'd better go out there," the older one said. He was chunky and weather-stained and he looked tough.

"It's too dark to do much of anything," I said.

"You didn't see any car? Jennings' car is missing."

"It may have been hidden somewhere."

"What did he seem to be doing out there?"

"Nothing. Walking near the highway."

"And no sign of Mosi?"

"We didn't see him."

"Doesn't make any sense."

He lit a cigarette off a wooden match. "I'll call up a helicopter from Timmons and have them search the road with a spotlight as far as Longlac. We'll set up roadblocks at Longlac and Nipigon. If he makes it to Thunder Bay, we're in trouble. Where're you staying?"

I told him. He told the young cop to jot down our names and home addresses.

"Is it all right if I check with you later?" I asked. "I'm curious to know what you turn up."

He shrugged his heavy shoulders under the tight, fitted shirt. "If the helicopter and the roadblocks don't turn up anything, I'll be driving out there with some men at first light."

"You want us to go along?" Jim asked.

"It wouldn't hurt anything. Maybe the spot where you passed him will look familiar."

"It all looked the same to me," Jim said. "All one hundred twenty-three miles of it."

"Never can tell," the older cop said. Then he turned to the young cop and asked him why he hadn't already called Timmons about the helicopter.

The young cop (by now I knew his name was Peters) was driving. Beside him, Schuller, the older guy, chain-smoked and stared stolidly through the misty rain. Jim and I occupied the back seat. There were three other cars of cops behind us.

The helicopter hadn't found anything. The roadblocks had also scored zero. Either Jennings had made it west of Nipigon or he'd disappeared somewhere between Hearst and there.

Schuller half-turned in his seat. "So you're a private dick back home, Bannon. Well, now you'll get a chance to show your stuff. We're about forty miles out of Hearst. Somewhere around here is where you say you saw that guy."

"I'm a P.I., not a magician."

He grinned—or as close as he could get to a grin—and stuck his cigarette back in his teeth.

"Slow down some," he told Peters. Peters eased up on the accelerator. Peters hadn't said a word for half an hour. I didn't think that Peters liked Schuller.

Our police-car caravan crawled through the rain at forty miles an hour. Fifteen minutes later, Schuller instructed Peters to pull over. We hadn't seen a thing out of the ordinary along the road.

"Okay, I want the area combed," Schuller said. "From here, ten miles back. One group will start here, one ten miles back, and two in the middle, working in both directions. Three men in each group. Have them scour the area between the road and about twenty feet into the wood line."

Peters got out to arrange the groups.

"Four groups to cover ten miles. Shouldn't take more'n a couple of hours," Schuller said.

"What do you expect to find?" Jim asked.

"Who knows? Maybe just some

crushed grass. Maybe some car tracks. Maybe a whole car. Make yourselves comfortable."

I set fire to a Camel, and Jim laid his head back on the seat to take a snooze. With the heater off, the car became very chilly.

Half an hour later one of the groups radioed that they'd found something.

A body.

Ray Mosi looked like hell under the beating rain. His uniform was muddy and torn, his hair matted against the pine needles, and his eyes wide open as if astonished or afraid. There were two bullet holes in his lower abdomen. Evidence in the area indicated that he'd dragged himself quite a way before dying. About fifty yards from his body, car tracks turned off the road and stopped in a small, murky clearing behind the tree line.

"Well, now it's murder," Schuller said.

"Should be easy," I offered. "You know who the killer is, his motive, which way he's headed..."

"There's a lot of country west of here," Schuller said.

"You don't think he's heading for the border?"

"They've already been alerted at the border crossings. He must know that."

"So where would he go?"

"With half a million dollars, he should be able to lose himself in some big city without too much trouble."

"His picture's in the newspapers."

"We'll wait and see," Schuller said. "I think I'll go talk to his wife again."

"What about Mosi's wife?"

"Mosi didn't have a wife."

"Mind if I go along with you?"

He just looked at me. "P.I.," he said finally. "Well, let's move it."

Jim had to get back to New York. He was supposed to be at work in two days. As it was, he'd probably be late. I thanked him for the invitation to the trip and shook hands at the motel. Then I jumped into the OPP car, wondering how the hell I was going to get to New York for my flight to Puerto Rico.

Arthur Jennings' house on the outskirts of Kapuskasing was a small, two story affair with a freshly turned garden on the side. Its back sat against woods, and the next nearest house was a good hundred yards off. Across the road was a picturesque little lake; a green rowboat rocked on a chain at the water's edge. It was a nice place to live if you didn't like too much company.

The woman who opened the door to us was pretty, dark-

haired, about twenty-six. Although she fell short of beautiful, she had that indefinable sexual quality that attracts men. It attracted me.

"Have you found Arthur?" was the first thing she said to Schuller.

"No," he said brusquely, "we haven't."

"Well?" she said.

"Mind if we come in a minute?" Schuller asked.

"Oh," she said, "of course."

Schuller, Peters, and I filed into the hallway and she shut the door behind us. She led the way to a neat, nicely furnished little living room. None of us took seats.

"You must know by now he had nothing to do with the robbery," Mrs. Jennings blurted out. "Arthur would never do a thing like that."

"Then where is he?" Schuller asked.

She bit her pretty lower lip. "I don't understand it," she said.

"We've found the other man, Mosi," Schuller said. "We found his body. He'd been shot twice."

The blood drained from her face like coffee through a strainer. "I . . . I . . ." she said, and she sat down.

"Can I get you a glass of water?" young Peters offered quickly.

"No . . . I'll be all right." She looked far from all right. "You can't think that Arthur . . ."

Schuller said carefully, "It does kind of look that way."

"No," she said. "No, it can't be."

"You told us yesterday that you had no notion your husband might be planning to rob the company," Schuller said.

"Of course not. He *had* no plan."

"Couldn't he have been planning it without telling you?"

"I don't think so," she said. "You don't know Arthur."

"He hasn't contacted you since yesterday morning?"

"This is terrible," she said softly. "You can't imagine how I've felt these last twenty-four hours."

"Possibly your husband acted on impulse," Schuller persisted. "The temptation of all that money in the vault was too much for him."

"Then how do you explain this man Mosi?" she asked quietly.

"Well, supposing this guy Mosi caught your husband in the act of taking the money. Mosi was armed. Instead of apprehending your husband, he insists on going with him and splitting the half million. They take off in your husband's car, but instead of heading south towards the border, your husband heads directly west on a very deserted highway."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because he didn't want to

share with Mosi and was planning to get rid of him, hide the body in the woods where it would probably never be found."

"You forget," she said, sounding tired now, "Mosi had the gun, not Arthur."

"Maybe your husband had a gun too—for example, in the car."

"No," she said. "Arthur never owned a gun."

"Well, then he got Mosi's gun away somehow and shot him with it. Mosi's gun was missing when we found him. We'll find out soon enough when the bullets are extracted."

"It's all so farfetched," Mrs. Jennings said. "Just incredible. I think I will have some water," she said to Peters. "There's a bottle of aspirin on the fridge."

Peters went into the kitchen, and I asked if she minded if I smoked.

She shook her head. "Who are you?" she asked.

"My name's Carlos Bannon. I'm a private investigator from Puerto Rico."

"I don't follow . . ."

"I'm here more or less by accident. My fishing buddy and I happened to see your husband on the highway between Hearst and Longlac yesterday."

"But you didn't tell me anyone had seen Arthur," she turned on Schuller.

"Sorry," he said. "We've been awfully busy since then."

I dropped my match in a heavy blue glass ashtray. It was chipped. Considering the pristine neatness of the place, I was surprised she kept a chipped ashtray around.

"Well, tell me about Arthur," she said impatiently.

"He was alone," I said, "on foot. I didn't see Mosi or the car. But this morning, in addition to Mosi's body, we found the tracks of your husband's car where they'd pulled off the road."

"What was he *doing*?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Just walking."

Peters returned with the water and aspirin. She gulped down three. She continued to look pale.

"If your husband does get in touch with you, you have to let us know," Schuller said. "If you don't, you may be an accessory after the fact."

"You don't have any children, Mrs. Jennings?" I asked.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Just curiosity. I'm sorry, it's none of my business."

"We had a little boy," she said. "He died in a car accident four years ago." Suddenly the tears started to stream. "Please," she said, "I'd like to be alone. Can't I be alone? If I hear from Arthur I'll let you know, but can't I *please* be alone?"

Schuller's normally red face turned redder. He didn't know

how to deal with distraught women. I didn't like to. We beat a hasty retreat toward the door. The last out was Peters, who seemed divided between his sympathy for the crying woman and his glee at his chief's discomfiture.

"What do you think?" Schuller asked me in the car.

"I don't know. Your hypothetical reconstruction sounds pretty good."

"Yeah," Schuller said. "Unless the woman's lying."

"She didn't seem to me the type to be lying," Peters said.

"Yeah, you're the expert on women, ain't you," Schuller said. "We're just so goddamn lucky we can make use of your vast experience with women."

From Jennings' house we drove to the North Star Mining Company on the other side of town. They had the numbers of some of the stolen bills, and Schuller wanted to pick up the list they'd prepared for him. We talked to an accountant who worked in the same office as Jennings, a balding little man who stared at us vacantly through thick glasses. His name was Pitts.

"Only about a third of it is identifiable," Pitts said.

Schuller grunted and glanced over the list. He took out a wooden match and chewed on it. "Tell me," he said to Pitts,

"what were these two guys, Jennings and Mosi, like?"

"Oh, very different types. I'm surprised they would team up together. Jennings was a company man, sixteen years... A good manager—conservative, quiet."

"Did he seem discontented lately?"

"Not that I noticed."

"Did he have any problems or anything like that? Debts, sickness in the family, a woman on the side?"

"Nothing ever seemed to happen to Arthur. His life was the same, day in, day out."

Pitts said all this expressionlessly, peering at us like a paralyzed owl.

"When did he get married?" Schuller asked.

"I don't know exactly—before I came to work here."

"Did he ever talk about his marriage, his wife?"

"Not much. I got the impression they had a normal, comfortable marriage. Arthur wasn't a man for any kind of extremes."

"Robbing half a million and maybe committing a murder seem pretty extreme to me," Schuller said.

The owl eyes widened perceptibly. "A murder?"

"Mosi's dead," Schuller said curtly. "What kind of guy was he?"

"As I said, very different from

Arthur. He's only been a security guard with us about a year. Mosi was a bit," he looked for the word, "sleazy."

"What do you mean sleazy?"

"The kind of person you wouldn't expect to hold any job long. He talked a lot about gambling. He liked to shoot dice—he called it 'craps.' Many times when he came to work he looked to me as if he were recovering from a drinking bout."

"What about women?"

"You would expect him to be a woman chaser, but I don't know of any since he came to work here. I don't think he'd ever been married."

"Who were his friends around here?"

"I don't think Ray Mosi had any real friends." Pitts pinched his thin lips together. "He was too—"

"Yeah, I know: sleazy," Schuller said. "Is Mr. MacLaughlin in?"

"I think so."

"I know the way," Schuller said, pushing rather roughly past Pitts and turning out through a glass door. Peters and I followed. We walked down a short, tiled hallway to another frosted glass door on which was printed FRANCIS X. MACLAUGHLIN, DISTRICT SUPERVISOR. Schuller rapped smartly on the door.

"Who is it?" called a male voice.

Schuller pushed open the door and the man's voice said, "Ah hah, Schuller, come in. Have there been any new developments?"

Peters and I followed into an office that was roomy but very plain, with a long pine desk-table taking up much of the space. A quartet of file cabinets, some shelves full of journals and maps, another smaller table against one wall, and a new air conditioner completed the interior decoration. Behind the pine desk on a swivel chair sat a tall man of about fifty, grey templed and good looking for his age. He looked as if he could use the head under the silvery hair.

"Some," Schuller said. "This is Mr. Bannon from Puerto Rico. He and a friend of his spotted Arthur Jennings on the highway to Longlac yesterday. We've been out there. We found Mosi's body with two bullets in it."

"My God. It's hard to believe that Arthur would . . ."

"Well, it certainly looks like he did. Look, Mr. MacLaughlin, yesterday you told me that Jennings was a fine employee, a company man through and through. But now it doesn't look quite that way. How do you explain the discrepancy?"

"I can't explain it. Not at all."

"Could Jennings have been discontent, or troubled about something?"

"Arthur Jennings was a very private sort of person. That was one of the things I liked about him."

"Did you notice any changes at all in his behavior recently?"

"No, none."

"What was his salary?"

"About twenty-eight thousand, I think."

"Would you say he was the kind of man who, faced with a temptation like half a million dollars, might impulsively go for it?"

Maclaughlin leaned back in his chair. "Who can say what any of us might do, given a strong enough temptation? Until yesterday, I would have said no, not Jennings."

"His wife is an attractive woman," Schuller said. "Do you know if there were any problems in his marriage?"

"I'm not sure what you're getting at, but judging from what little he said, I got the impression he was perfectly happy with his marriage."

"What can you tell me about Mosi?"

"Him I would think capable of something like this. Rolling stone type. He'd only been with us about a year. I've heard he did some gambling."

"Did he chase women?"

"I wouldn't be surprised, but I never heard anything specific on the subject."

"There should be a girlfriend

somewhere," Schuller said.

"Well, not in this company—gossip is a favorite pastime around here, I'm afraid."

"There was no evidence of a female companion at his apartment," Schuller said. "Who were his friends?"

"I don't know of anyone he socialized with," Maclaughlin said.

"Relatives?"

"Ray Mosi came from Toronto. You'd have to check there."

"I will," Schuller said. "Since I last saw you, we've set up roadblocks and alerted all the border crossings, but there's still no sign of Jennings. Where do you think he'd head for?"

Maclaughlin shook his head.

"I have no idea."

"What kind of gun was Mosi issued?"

"A Smith & Wesson .38 caliber, as I recall."

"We're shipping his body to Toronto for autopsy, ballistics, et cetera. We should know soon if he was killed with a .38."

"I imagine he was," Maclaughlin said. "You didn't find the gun on him?"

"No, his holster was empty. And Mrs. Jennings says her husband didn't own a gun."

"I'd doubt it. God, I can't understand that man."

"What do you think might have happened, Mr. Maclaughlin?"

"I suppose you're right: the temptation was too much for Arthur. He enlisted Mosi's help and they both fled in Arthur's car. Then an argument over the money, and Arthur somehow shot Mosi."

"Why would he enlist Mosi's help?"

"I can't say." He scratched his silvery hair. "I suppose they'll be sending some regular homicide people up to investigate now."

"They didn't seem very anxious. Asked us to keep them apprised of developments. They claim they have a manpower shortage down there."

"Well anyway, it seems fairly clear what must have happened," Maclaughlin said.

"I don't know, it still sounds pretty thin to me," Schuller said. "But then," he turned and leered at me, "I'm not a Sam Spade from the big city."

Instead of driving back to the OPP, Schuller had Peters take us to Mosi's apartment house, an old and dingy looking place close to the railroad tracks. He wanted to talk to Mosi's neighbors. Actually, as he admitted, he was running out of ideas as to what to do next on this case.

There were three apartments to a floor. Mosi's had been the center one on the third floor. The police had already been all

over it. We buzzed at the door of 301 down the hall. Through the door we could hear kids screaming in accompaniment to a woman's fruitless commands.

"Who is it?" yelled the woman's voice.

"Police," Schuller yelled back.

The heavy wooden door opened three inches against a chain. A woman eyed us through the crack and then undid the chain. She was wearing a stained housecoat that hung unflatteringly from her lumpy body. Her hair looked as if frogs had been playing tag in it. She was in her thirties and looked every inch the frumpy, embattled *hausfrau* rapidly losing all the battles. Behind her, three kids, two boys and a girl, were using the furniture for a playground and each other for targets.

"I figured you'd be around," the woman said. "You want to know about the guy Mosi next door."

"That's right," Schuller said.

"He didn't show me much," she said. "I saw him come in drunk more than once. Unfriendly. He complained about my kids all the time—said he could hear them through the walls."

The little girl behind her started crying, and she shouted at Arnold to leave his sister alone.

"Did he have any company?" Schuller asked.

"There was a woman I saw a couple of times. Trashy type: long blonde hair and too much makeup. Too flashy by half."

"You're sure it was the same woman both times?"

"Yeah. She stayed a few hours and left. 'Course I don't keep watch on him: she could have come every day for all I know."

"You don't know anything more about her?"

"Nope. As you can see, I got my hands full twenty-four hours a day."

She turned and yelled at Arnold again. Five minutes of this place was getting on my nerves; twenty-four hours a day would have killed me altogether. I was glad when Schuller jotted down her name, thanked her, and we tramped down the hall to the door of 303.

This time the buzzer was answered by an old man in baggy pants and an undershirt. A funny odor wafted from the door, but the apartment looked clean. His tired old face perked up when he heard we wanted information about his notorious neighbor. He invited us in, but Schuller declined. Perhaps the odd smell also bothered him.

"The woman in 301 says that Mosi had a lady friend," Schuller said. "You know anything about her?"

The ancient, filmy eyes took

on a knowing expression. "Beautiful girl," he said. "Long blonde hair, nicely dressed, good figure."

Age hadn't dampened his appreciation for beautiful girls.

"How old would you say she was?" Schuller asked.

"Oh, young. Under thirty."

"He never introduced you?"

"No, no. We don't socialize on this floor. Everybody minds their own business. Especially Mosi—I didn't see much of him."

"Did the woman come in a car?" I asked him.

"I don't think so. Didn't notice any."

"Where does the landlord live?" Schuller asked him.

"God knows. We send the rent to a box number. Curley Real Estate."

"What about the superintendent?"

"Downstairs in 101. But I don't think he'll be much help."

We went down to 101 and talked to the skinny, grey-headed super. He wasn't much help. All he seemed to remember was that Mosi was always having trouble with his toilet and calling him up to fix it. The plumbing in the building was old—there wasn't much he could do. Schuller thanked him and we walked out to the car.

"Waste of time," Schuller said.

"Not totally. We did learn that Mosi had a blonde girl friend."

"A lot of good that does us," Schuller said. "You know how many attractive blondes there are even in a town this size?"

"You can never have too many attractive blondes," I said.

Peters snickered and Schuller barked at him to drive back to the OPP.

It was time for me to be getting back to New York, but I couldn't bring myself to leave. A man had vanished in spite of police roadblocks, a border alert, and a description of himself and his car that had been circulated all over Canada. I'm as curious as the next guy, more so when it involves my line of work. So I stayed over another night and at nine A.M. checked back at the OPP.

The weather had turned. A cold front had blown in, and the sun cavorted brilliantly in a blue sky with high, feathery clouds. It gave a lift to your spirits. I invited Schuller to breakfast.

"Already had breakfast, but I'll join you for a cup of coffee."

We walked to a nearby corner restaurant with booths and beer ads for decoration, and I ordered eggs and toast, and coffee for us both.

"The autopsy and ballistics reports came in this morning," Schuller said. "Only thing of interest is that the bullets that killed Mosi were .38's, the same

ones issued to North Star's security guards. Fired from a few feet away."

Our coffee arrived. It looked like hot tar. I cut mine with milk, Schuller just sugared his. He took a sip and half grinned. "Hope you like it strong."

"Just so long as it'll brush off my teeth."

He lit a cigarette and stuck the wood end of the match in his mouth to gnaw on. "We've got the boys in Toronto checking on Mosi's relatives. Nothing from them as yet. When are you planning to return to your sunny isle?"

"I thought I'd hang on a while and see if you turn up the disappearing man."

"Be glad to hear if you've got any ideas," Schuller said. I couldn't tell if he was serious or not. With a guy like him, the only way he'd be able to ask for help would be ironically.

"Well," I said, "if you're serious, I'd keep an eye on Mrs. Jennings. What we know about her doesn't quite hold together. If she and Jennings had a good marriage, as people say, why would he do this to her?"

"Unless she was in on the robbery," Schuller said, "and plans to meet up with him later on. Anyway I already thought about that: I've had two guys staked out on her place since seven this morning."

"Only standard procedure,"

I said. "It would also be standard procedure to keep an eye on Jennings' known relatives."

"There are just three of them," Schuller said, "a mother and two sisters. We are keeping an eye on them."

The waitress brought my scrambled eggs and toast. I forced some coffee down my throat and started on the eggs.

"And then," I said, "I would search Jennings' house."

"How do you figure?"

"What if he and his wife *are* in this together? Maybe the reason he's disappeared is that he doubled back here during the night and she's got him hidden there."

"And where's the car?"

"He ditched it somewhere."

"Sounds really farfetched to me," Schuller said. He blew grey smoke out thoughtfully. "But I'll get a search warrant and have the place gone over."

The rest of that day I hung around the OPP office. According to the stakeouts at Jennings' place, the wife went out only once, to buy groceries at a general store a couple of blocks away. Toronto informed us that Mosi's parents were both dead—in a traffic accident eight years ago—and there were no siblings. In the absence of any known relatives, Mosi's body was being turned over to a medical school.

Late that afternoon, Jennings' house was searched. Mrs. Jennings was understandably upset at the procedure. Her husband wasn't there.

I spent another night at my motel.

On the following day, Schuller got his first big break. Mrs. Jennings changed a hundred dollar bill in a department store buying a sweater. The hundred was one of the identifiable bills from the North Star robbery.

"It's crazy," Schuller said. "How could she do something so stupid?"

"Did the newspapers know some of the bill numbers were recorded?"

"No, but her husband would have known. Didn't he tell her?"

"It's time to search the house again," I said. "Really search it."

"How could he have got in? We had the house staked out; Mrs. Jennings was followed."

"Obviously he got to her before you sent over your men."

"He doesn't have to be at the house. She could have met him somewhere."

"That's right, but I'd still take that house apart."

"Son of a bitch," Schuller said, "I just can't wait to have a talk with that little lady."

They came in on the house

from all sides with weapons drawn. Mrs. Jennings seemed amazed, afraid, angry by turns. She said she'd sue the police department. Schuller told her that he had sufficient cause and a legal warrant. Arthur Jennings was nowhere in sight, so they started in on the place while Schuller questioned Mrs. Jennings in the living room.

He held the hundred dollar bill up to her face. "You see that? That is one of the bills from the North Star robbery. Where did you get it?"

"I don't remember," she said. She was really scared now; it showed in her big brown eyes. "You must be mistaken."

"Either you met your husband soon after the robbery or he's hidden around here somewhere," Schuller said. "You were in on the robbery."

"No," she said.

"You planned it together, and you know where he is now."

"No," she said.

"Oh, you'll tell us," Schuller said. "Don't worry about that."

"There's nothing to tell. What are they *doing*?"

What they were doing was sounding all the walls and floors for a possible hiding place. One team was up on the second floor, another in the basement. A third was combing the woods around the house.

"He's not *here*," Mrs. Jennings said. "I haven't seen him."

"Where did you get this hundred dollar bill?"

"I—I don't know."

It went on like that. After half an hour the search teams had uncovered nothing and neither had Schuller. By now Marilyn Jennings had recovered some of her self-possession. She didn't have to put up with this; she wanted to call her lawyer. Schuller read her her legal rights.

She called her lawyer; he wasn't in. She left a message for him to call her as soon as possible.

The teams from upstairs and the basement were now working on the ground floor. There was a din of tapping, scraping, banging. One of the men asked if we could move to a different part of the living room. He and another man moved the sofa and two chairs and a brown six-by-nine rug. We all saw the tell-tale rectangle in the wood floor at the same moment. Suddenly the room was strangely silent.

Schuller and the others drew their guns, and he motioned for Peters to get behind the trap and open it with the hinged handle that was folded back against the floor. Peters didn't look too eager, but he positioned himself, reached down and hooked three fingers around the handle, and then jerked up hard and fast. The large trap door snapped back, revealing

an empty space about six feet by three feet and thirteen or so inches deep. The sudden release of breath on all sides was audible. Mrs. Jennings was staring into the hole with a face like stone.

"Well," Schuller said quietly, "let's all go down to the office."

He really worked on her that afternoon. If her lawyer called back, she didn't get the message. She admitted that her husband had planned the robbery ahead of time—he'd known the money would be in the vault two weeks before—but she had tried to talk him out of it. She had never agreed, but she couldn't turn over her own husband to the police. He had made the hiding place in the floor to use when the police came after the robbery. Eventually they would stop coming and he could relax. More eventually they could both go away and start a new life with all that money. She, of course, had agreed to none of it.

Where was the car? Schuller asked.

Arthur had run it into a deep lake near Moonbeam and walked the fifteen miles to the house at night. He'd done all his driving by night, doubling back by the most deserted roads to the south, looking down every street before he chanced it with the car. It took him most of two nights.

Why hadn't the roadblocks got him?

He'd turned south on Route 625 before Longlac.

Where was he now?

He'd changed his plans because of the death of Mosi. Mosi had surprised him during the robbery and insisted on splitting the money. Arthur hadn't liked it, but had no choice—Mosi had a gun. They had used Arthur's car to drive west—Mosi had chosen the western route because he planned to shoot Arthur in a deserted spot along the way and hide the body in the woods. This Arthur found out when he was ordered at gunpoint to pull off the highway into the trees. Mosi had aimed the gun at Arthur, but Arthur was desperate and knew he had nothing to lose, so he'd jumped for Mosi, receiving a bullet in the arm. But in the struggle he'd managed to get the gun and shoot Mosi twice, killing him.

When he'd returned home, she had doctored his arm as best she could, and he, nervous because of a possible murder charge as well as grand larceny, had said he felt it was too dangerous to stay as he'd planned. He'd left, giving her about a thousand dollars to tide her over. She didn't know where he was now. He hadn't contacted her again.

Schuller asked where the

money was. She took it out of the purse slung over the back of her chair. Schuller asked when and how her husband planned to get in touch with her. He hadn't said. He was too rattled by what had happened.

That was about all we got out of her before dinnertime. Marilyn Jennings was booked on counts of accessory before the fact, accessory after the fact, and possession of stolen property. She received the call from her lawyer about fifteen minutes later.

I had dinner with Schuller at his favorite greasy spoon and then walked back to my motel. I didn't like it at all. The hole in the floor had been bizarre enough, but not as bizarre as Marilyn Jennings' story. It troubled my sleep all night.

“So you think she's lying,” Schuller said.

“Absolutely. A lot of it may be true, but not all of it. I don't like Jennings' leaving a perfectly good hiding place to hit the road without a car. I don't like his giving her money to 'tide her over' that he knew was, or could be, traceable. She knows where he is.”

“And she wants to protect him.”

“I doubt it.”

“Then what does she have to gain by not telling us? We have

her on three serious counts. What more do we need?”

“That's what bothers me most: that she's lying even in the face of a stiff prison sentence.”

“You think she has the rest of the money,” Schuller said.

“Yes, I do.”

“Her husband left it with her and she hid it?”

“Maybe—if her husband is still alive.”

That gave him pause. “Why would she kill her husband?”

“I think I know,” I said. “I think it was because we gave her some very bad news.”

Half an hour later we were back at the Jennings house digging up the freshly-turned garden. That was my suggestion. It wasn't one of my best because the only things we unearthed were two ancient shoes and half a shovel. No money. No body.

I was stymied. The big garden had seemed the logical place. A grave in the nearby woods would be too obvious. She hadn't had a car to take it anywhere. It *had* to be nearby.

Maybe Jennings was alive. There was no place else around except . . .

“The lake,” I said. “The lake across the road. They have a rowboat on it.”

From where we stood, we could see the green wooden boat bobbing beneath the aspens. It

looked pretty against the sunlit water. We crossed the road and slid down a steep, gravelly path to the shore.

For a little lake it appeared surprisingly deep, the bottom already out of sight six feet from shore. There were big grey boulders, sand, a little weed. The water had that dark tea color so common in Canada. I saw a school of tiny yellow perch and one two-foot pike at the weed edge.

"This'll take some professionals," Schuller said.

"There's no hurry. He won't be leaving."

"I just hope you're right this time," Schuller said.

By six that evening they'd found Jennings' body. I was there to watch it come up. The cool lake water had kept it in fairly decent condition, but fish had been nibbling at the wounds in the left arm and head. The right side and rear of the skull were crushed in. The neck and ankles were wrapped tightly with plastic clothesline to which were attached four fifteen-pound vinyl-jacketed barbell weights. He was wearing blue pajamas.

Once the body had been found, Marilyn Jennings gave us the rest of the story in spite of her lawyer's advice. She didn't care any more. She seemed glad now to have witnesses to her bitterness, to the nasty ironies of life.

We soon learned, as I'd suspected, that underneath the fawn eyes lurked the lubricity of a goat.

She had been having an affair with Ray Mosi for almost a year, using a blonde wig and heavy makeup when she met him. Ray had been unpredictable, exciting, a little "wild"—so different from her boring, conventional husband. It reached the point where she couldn't stand to have Arthur Jennings touch her.

Then, a couple of weeks ago, he had come home from work with the first unconventional idea of his life: to rob the company of half a million dollars. It was incredible, but even he could be corrupted by enough temptation.

They planned the robbery, made the hiding place in the floor together. The plan was a good one except for one aspect that Arthur Jennings didn't know about: his wife had let her lover Mosi in on it. Mosi was to "catch" Jennings during the robbery, insist they split the money, and then, during their "escape," kill him in some deserted spot. *He* would use Jennings' bizarre hiding place until enough time had passed to move safely to Toronto and enjoy the money.

When she learned from us that afternoon that it was Mosi, not her husband, who had been

killed, she almost fell apart. If she'd ever hated Arthur Jennings, it wasn't an atom of what she felt now. That night, when he and not her lover returned to the house, she had already determined to kill him. She pretended everything was fine, commiserated with him in his story about Mosi, and doctored his wounded arm.

She had hoped to use the gun, but the fool had left the gun in the car, which he'd sunk in a lake. He thought of it as evidence against him and anyway he was nervous about guns—even after having used one to kill Mosi. He fell asleep quickly that night. Mrs. Jennings rose from bed and searched the house for a weapon. She was on her way to the kitchen for a bread knife when her eyes fell upon the very heavy glass ashtray in the living room. For some reason that way of killing Arthur better suited her mood. She would hit him, hit him, crush his skull, this man who had murdered her lover.

Schuller asked her where the money was.

"I buried it in the woods far from the house. The place is camouflaged with pine needles. I'll show you where it is."

"Why did you spend that hundred dollar bill?"

"Arthur didn't tell me any of the money was traceable. He didn't have a chance."

Schuller had offered to have one of his men drive me to Toronto to catch a plane for New York. We drank a last cup of miserable coffee before I took off.

"You know, I wouldn't have taken her for a cold-blooded killer," he said.

"More like a hot-blooded one."

He extended his pack of Play-ers and we lit up.

"I guess there's just something wrong with me," I said. "I've been around forty-three years—I've seen everything and done most everything. And yet every time I run into real evil, it seems like an aberration to me. I can't get used to it—especially in the pretty form of someone like Marilyn Jennings. There must be some vestige of romanticism that's refused to be clubbed to death. Someday it will be."

Schuller looked surprised and uncomfortable that I could be serious for a minute. Then he cracked his grin. "Well, I don't think I would have broke it—so soon—without your help, Bannon." He slapped me on the arm. "Maybe you are some kind of hotshot detective after all."

FICTION

Kiss the Vampire Goodbye

by Alan Ryan



Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

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I never believed in ghosts or vampires or zombies or anything like that. I always thought that stuff was silly, maybe good enough to entertain women and children with a harmless little scare, but there was nothing in it for a private investigator trying to make an honest living. That's what I try to do. I try to make an honest living—honest enough to let me sleep soundly at night and enough of a living to keep the rent paid on a cheap apartment in West L.A. and a two-room office downtown, with maybe a little left over for a drink at night to help me forget the kind of people I have to deal with during the day. So when Mary Cantrell showed up in my office one afternoon and told me her father had been killed by a vampire, I nearly told her to take a walk.

She looked like what used to be called "a pretty little thing," back in the days when you could describe a woman that way and not get your block knocked off. What I mean is, she wasn't one of your modern, super-liberated women, all hard bony edges and a chip on her shoulder—not Mary Cantrell. She was little enough, maybe five two, and she was pretty, nobody could argue with that. I pegged her at twenty-three. Black hair tied up on her head in some way that's a mystery to men, except you know that if she ever lets it down around her shoulders, you better hold onto your heart and start taking some very deep breaths. Skin like milk. And those eyes. Those eyes were so dark and deep that you wanted to crawl inside right through them and be safe and secure for the rest of your life. I thought I could see in those eyes and in the way she held her head a kind of diamond-like quality, a nerve, a kind of spunkiness, a hardness in the center. She was wearing a dark blue skirt and a plain white blouse, no jewelry. She didn't need jewelry. She had those eyes. I liked her.

"I need your help, Mr. Kendall," she said.

"Where did you hear about me?"

Her eyes didn't waver at the question. That's something I watch for.

"The phone book," she said. "The yellow pages."

People say that to me more often than you'd think. So I looked her over, nodded, and I let her talk.

While she told me her story, I sat at my desk moving papers around as if I had an overwhelming load of urgent cases. And the more I listened, the more I realized that Mary Cantrell's spunkiness was definitely riding in the back seat today. She was scared, badly scared. And when a spunky girl gets scared, I get interested.

When she was done, I didn't let any expression show in my face.

I said, "Tell me again. Go more slowly this time. Tell it in order and tell me everything."

"Aren't you going to write anything down?" she asked. She was looking at the expanse of bare, scarred wood I had cleared on the desk in front of me. Despite her grief at her father's death, and despite the scare that had sent her looking for me in the first place, she was thinking clearly.

"Don't worry about it," I told her. "I have a memory like a banker." That wasn't a good thing to say because her father, recently deceased, had been a banker. I didn't know that until she started the story again.

She looked at me closely for a few seconds, studying my face, and then obviously reached a decision.

"All right," she said, in a very businesslike sort of way. Not only did I like this girl, I was already beginning to admire her. And even if her story sounded crazy, she might just be able to make me believe it.

"My name is Mary Cantrell," she began. "My father is . . . my father *was* Jonathan David Cantrell, the founder of California Trade Enterprises, with headquarters in Santa Barbara. Are you familiar with it?"

"They own the California Trade Bank?"

"Yes."

"Even as we speak, I owe CTB fourteen hundred ninety-two dollars, give or take some change. We share ownership of a car."

She didn't blink.

"My father was a multimillionaire."

She said it the way you might mention that your dad had always been pretty good at tying bows on Christmas packages.

"My mother died giving birth to me. I was always the light of my father's life, the living image of my mother, my father always said, and he raised me himself. With the help of our servants, of course."

"Of course," I said.

She heard the tone in my voice because I'd intended her to hear it. She hesitated for a fraction of a second, her eyes meeting mine, then decided to ignore it. That was good because, in the instant our eyes met, we both realized we'd been testing each other. We both passed the test.

"Despite the fact that my father never remarried, and I know he was very often lonely, ours was always a happy home. He and I were devoted to each other, and the servants have been with us

for so many years that they're all like my own family."

"Any other family?"

"None," she answered at once. "Both my parents were only children. I'm the last in the line," she said, her voice wavering for the first time, "so the Cantrell name dies with me."

She suddenly looked as if she thought that might happen sometime soon.

"Go on," I told her. I sat back in my chair, trying not to make it squeak the way it usually does. I wanted to signal to her that I was satisfied she could tell the story straight, with all the good bits included, and I wouldn't interrupt again.

She got the message. She didn't fidget while she talked. She concentrated. Her eyes stayed fixed on that bare patch on my desk, as if the drama of her life was being re-enacted there in front of her and all she had to do was watch it and describe what happened.

"My father was always a very successful man, but he never sought any of the notoriety that often goes with success. He had no desire whatsoever to be in the public eye, no desire to show off his wealth, no political ambitions. I know that in his earlier years he turned down many opportunities, and people, business acquaintances, still sometimes came to him with offers while I was growing up, but he always refused. He was good at what he did. He was a genius at it, building companies and trading, and knowing that, seeing his enterprises grow and prosper, was satisfaction enough for him.

"He built Kirkdale for my mother forty years ago, up in the hills, and he kept it absolutely private. It was always our home and nothing else. I grew up there and I love it as much as I loved my father. No one was ever permitted to intrude at Kirkdale. The house itself is a work of art, the view of the hills and the ocean is magnificent, the sunsets take your breath away, and the gardens could win prizes anywhere in the world.

"But Kirkdale was ours and ours alone. He never brought work home with him. He never held meetings there, and no one from the office was even permitted to call him there. He always handled his business so carefully that no crisis could ever intrude on his private life. He even entertained elsewhere, so that strangers never even saw the estate. Only once, about seven years ago, he permitted a photographer from *Paris Match* to take pictures of the garden. It was a favor, really, to some French businessman, but my father always regretted it. We were besieged with requests after that. They were all refused.

"I'm telling you this as background, so you'll understand the context of what happened last night and this morning. Shall I go on?"

I slid a little lower in the chair. It squeaked but we both ignored it.

"There are nine servants at Kirkdale. Most of them have been with my father all of my life. The others were all screened more thoroughly than you'd think possible before they were hired. I'd trust any of them with my life. So did my father."

"Your father's dead," I said. When you have a suspicious mind, there are times when you can't keep your big mouth shut.

She pressed her lips together for a second. Ordinarily they were very pink. Now they turned white.

"Let me tell you the rest," she said. "This morning, my father didn't appear for breakfast. That happened rarely, but it did happen sometimes, so I didn't think much of it. He was getting on in years, and he was beginning to slow down a little. But when he hadn't come down by nine o'clock, I went up to his room. It was empty. The bed hadn't been slept in. I immediately had the servants search the house, and when he wasn't there, we searched all the grounds. The estate is very large and it took a while, about an hour, in fact, but we found him. He was in the rose garden. He . . . was dead, lying on the ground. At first I thought he'd had a stroke or a heart attack. I thought he must have gone out for some air and fallen right where he was, into a tangled plot of rosebushes. He was caught in the branches and tangled up in the thorns very badly."

She stopped for a moment and dropped her gaze onto the hands knotted in her lap. I waited. Then she sighed and raised her head again.

"What else was there to think? He must have just fallen there and gotten tangled. We were all very shaken, but we got him free and carried him inside to the house. I knew he had to die sooner or later, of course, but it was still terrible for me. All the worse, in fact, because his face and hands were badly scratched from the thorns. They're very long, nearly an inch and a half, and I was always warned, by my father and by the servants, to stay away from them when I was little. The bushes require a great deal of attention, too, but the flowers are particularly beautiful. They were my father's favorites in the whole garden, and of course I was struck at once by the irony, that it should be in that very place that he died.

"We laid my father's body on the sofa in the library. I sent the

servants outside, so that I could be alone with him for a few minutes, for the very last time. There was no rush, after all, no family to notify, and the business would go on comfortably without him. He had always planned long ahead and seen to that. I just needed a moment to be alone with him.

"I used my handkerchief to clean a little of the mud from his face and hands. That's when I saw the marks on his throat."

I didn't move. You don't hear a story like this every day, not even in my business.

"There were two deep punctures. At first I thought they were from the thorns, but then I saw they looked different. They were deeper, bigger. The skin was slightly torn, and puffy all around, and a little discolored. I was terrified but I wiped the blood away. I didn't want to believe it, but I was looking right at the marks. There was no other possible explanation."

She was watching me for a reaction. She didn't get one.

"Do you believe me, Mr. Kendall?"

"Finish the story."

"There's not much more to tell. I tried to put that part of it out of my mind for a minute, as best I could. I said goodbye to my father, and then I left the room to give instructions to the staff."

End of story. I looked at her and waited, but that was it.

A vampire. Her father had been bitten and killed by a vampire. The most beautiful girl I have ever been privileged to gaze upon was sitting in front of me, telling me that, and she had come to my office to hire me to track down the vampire and bring him to justice. I have chosen, I told myself for the ten-thousandth time, a very difficult line of work.

I sat up and folded my hands in front of me so they'd cover the worst scars on the desk. My hands have a few scars themselves, but the desk is a lot worse off.

"Who found your father in the rosebushes?" I asked her.

She looked startled, as if a glimmer of something had just appeared to her for the first time. "I did," she said.

"These roses were your father's favorites?"

"Yes."

"And none of the servants thought of looking there?"

"We looked everywhere."

"But the servants didn't look there. How many gardeners are on the staff?"

"Four, and the two outside men help them when necessary."

"That's six."

I thought things over for a while. I wasn't surprised to learn that I hated every bit of it.

"Who inherits?"

"I do."

"What about the servants?"

"They stay on with me, of course."

"Forever?"

"Yes, if they want to. Naturally, my father saw to it they'd be taken care of."

"Maybe *they* took care of *him*."

She shook her head. I liked the soft way her hair moved. "I couldn't believe a thing like that. You don't know them."

I tried a little smile. It didn't come out very well. "I don't know anything," I told her. "I'm just a blank page, soaking up information, impressions, ideas, waiting to see if any of them make sense. If you're lost in the Sahara and you come to what looks like a road, you figure it's got to go somewhere, right?"

I waited and made her say it. If we pursued this, we might have to go down some dark roads together. I wanted her eyes to be wide open.

"Right," she said, but she made me wait for it. I didn't mind a bit.

"Was your father dressed or wearing a bathrobe?"

"Just a bathrobe. Later, in his bedroom, I saw that the light was on and there was a book beside his chair. He must have gone out for some air after staying up reading."

"Did he do that often?"

"Not often, no, but sometimes."

"His hands and face were covered by scratches from the thorns?"

"Yes."

"And you wiped the blood from them with your handkerchief?"

"The only blood was on the puncture marks." Her eyes didn't waver, not even a little bit.

I was feeling very tired. There wouldn't be blood on the scratches from thorns if he got the scratches after he was dead.

"He was wearing only a bathrobe," I said. "No pajamas?"

"No."

"When he was carried inside, or when he was in the library, did you happen to notice the rest of his body? Maybe you looked for other scratches or marks, something like that."

"I did. There were a few scratches, but I didn't notice anything else."

“A vampire,” I said. I said it very quietly, very flat.

“Yes,” she told me.

We looked at each other.

“Will you help me?”

We looked at each other some more.

Finally, she managed a pale and sad little smile, as if she regretted putting this burden on me, but there was strength and growing confidence in it, too. And there were those eyes.

I hadn't seen a pretty girl smile in six weeks, and that was in the movies. It made me want to fix things, shift the world around to where it belonged, so Mary Cantrell could smile like that all the time.

I told her: “I'm your man.”

2

It's not every day you meet an albino Eskimo, and very few of the ones you do meet are named Danny Lavender. Nobody smiles when Danny tells them his name.

I met him a few years ago in a pedestrian underpass. He'd just been mugged and he needed a few bucks to get home. All I had was a ten, so I gave it to him. The next afternoon, around the time I usually start contemplating the big dramatic question of the day—beef pot pie or the Hungry Man turkey?—he walked into my office and put a nicely engraved picture of Alexander Hamilton on the desk in front of me.

I stared at the ten for a while, then I stared at him for a while.

“It's a big city,” I said when the shock had worn off a little. “How'd you find me?”

He kept his hands folded neatly in his lap.

“I'm here,” he said. He didn't say anything else.

“How'd you find me?” I said again. Dogged persistence is one of my long suits.

“I'm good at that sort of thing.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“What do you need done?”

I looked him over. I'm no dwarf myself—six feet tall plus a couple more inches I carry with me for emergencies—but it took a while to see all of this guy. If you had to get to the other side of a river, you could walk across on his shoulders. I know a lot of people who don't have a head as big as one of his hands. He was wearing a suit that had forgotten it was ever new around the same time my

own suit had lost its memory. He had a scarf around his neck, and he was holding gloves in one hand, a hat, maybe a fedora, in the other. A pair of sunglasses was sticking up from his breast pocket. No sunbathing for this beauty. His skin was as pink as a skinned rabbit's and his hair might have been previously owned by Caspar the Friendly Ghost.

"What's your name?" I said.

He told me. I didn't smile.

"How many guys did it take to mug you?"

"Five," he said. "Plus a couple of blunt instruments."

I made some eye contact with Alexander Hamilton, then I pocketed the ten and stood up.

"Let's go have dinner," I said. "I know a place where the burgers actually had a former association with beef."

We went to Joe's Place. I conduct a lot of my business there, mainly in the line of thinking things over by myself. It's bright, it's clean, the Formica is hardly chipped at all, and you can taste the syrup in the Cokes and the coffee in the coffee.

It's been known to get busy sometimes at lunch, but this was dinnertime. I led the way to my usual table near the wall. I've seen spies do that in the movies, and I figure I'm part of a great tradition. Joe came over himself.

"Hello, Mr. Kendall," he said.

He always calls me Mr. Kendall when I have somebody with me. He knows what I do for a living, and he figures it's a client and the formality makes dining in his establishment a little more elegant. I like Joe.

I ordered for both of us.

While we waited for the burgers, I asked Danny Lavender some questions. He used words as if you had to borrow them from the bank, but he got high marks for his answers.

He told me he was an Eskimo and that he was from the Klondike, which is so far up in Alaska that you don't need to know where it is. He told me he still had family there but he finally had to leave. Too much bright light for an albino.

"So you came to dark and storm-tossed California," I said.

"More buildings," he said. "More night work. I only work at night."

He was right enough about the night work. In a city like Los Angeles, everything, good or bad, top to bottom; depends on night work. Sometimes I think my whole life depends on night work.

I listened to him and I watched him. I liked the sound of his

voice and the fact that he only used it as necessary. I liked the way he looked me right in the eye when he talked. I also liked the size of him and the easy way he moved it around. I liked the ten in my pocket and the way he'd found me to return it. I even had a feeling Alex Hamilton would have liked him, too.

I told him: "I might have night work sometimes for an associate."

He looked at me across the table. He wasn't going to ask. I admired that.

"Besides," I said, "I read in a book someplace that all private investigators have to wear hats. I hate wearing a hat."

"I've got a hat."

"You've got a job, too."

Just then, Joe brought the burgers to the table and set them down. "Joe," I said, "I want you to meet my new associate, Danny Lavender."

Danny stuck out one of his hams and Joe took hold of as much of it as he could grasp.

Within the next year, Danny Lavender saved my neck three times. I buy him a lot of burgers at Joe's Place.

My luck was running high and the car started on the first attempt. I followed Mary Cantrell out of the city and up to Kirkdale. The two cars going up the road like that must have looked like before and after.

I like driving. You can feel the ground beneath you, feel the wind in your face, feel yourself moving forward. It's easy to kid yourself that you're accomplishing something useful, when all you're really doing is driving a car. I didn't know what I was doing that day.

I thought about it and decided that I only believed two things just then. I believed there were no such things as vampires. And I believed Mary Cantrell when she said her father had been killed by one. So I thought about it some more, and decided that I really only believed one thing. I believed those eyes.

We left the coast highway and headed up into the hills. In a few minutes, we were on roads that don't deserve the name.

Then we got to Kirkdale.

It was surrounded by a fence, but the fence was discreetly hidden by trees and bushes. So was the gate. Mary Cantrell must have worked some widget in the car because when we got there a clump of trees very considerably and just as silently slid out of the way for us. When we'd passed through, they glided back into place and pretended they hadn't moved.

There are countries in the U.N. with less acreage than we passed on the driveway. I should have expected the house, but you never expect a house like that one.

Mary Cantrell had told me it was on top of a hill, but if this hill had come to visit Mohammed, he wouldn't have felt slighted. It was a respectable size, not quite as big as Windsor Castle and with fewer chimneys than Pittsburgh. Gardens and greenhouses stretched away down the hill. From the side of the house where we parked the cars, you could see half the Pacific Ocean. On a clear day, you might even spot hula girls in the distance.

My car was wheezing from the altitude. While it coughed itself into silence, I put my hands on my hips and tried to take in the scene. When I turned back toward the house, a first cousin of Bela Lugosi was standing in the doorway.

Mary Cantrell whispered to me that the Dracula look-alike was Hawkins, her father's personal valet. I decided that if I had to wake up every morning to see him laying out my suit, the only thing I'd have to be grateful for was that I wasn't in it.

It was a nice house. The front entry sent back echoes of our footsteps. If you were a bat, you'd always know where you were.

I'd instructed Mary to tell the staff that I was an insurance investigator. I figured I'd hint to them myself that I had undefined links to the lawyer's office that would be handling the will. That way they should be willing to cooperate and also be on their best behavior. Lawyers and insurance companies are notoriously reluctant to hand out money to the grieving relatives when they can't clap eyes on the corpse.

In a few minutes, Hawkins had assembled the whole staff in the drawing room. They weren't a pretty picture.

I went for the three women first. If that sounds mean, I'll have to live with it. Murder is pretty mean, too.

The cook was Dracula's missus. She looked like she might have an attack of severe *angst* any minute, so I started on her with a sharp jab. "Where's Cantrell's body?"

I said it out of the side of my mouth, the way you see it done in the movies. It's a good technique. People automatically know how they're supposed to react. Mrs. Dracula jumped like she'd just found a spider spinning a web in her mouth. Everybody else froze and looked extremely unhappy. I gave up any hopes of being voted Houseguest of the Year.

"I . . . I don't know."

It was a good answer and the others began to thaw out a little. I came back with more questions, to keep the temperature low, but I didn't expect to learn anything from this session unless one of them tipped something by accident. After about five minutes, I knew they were too good for that, or else they were all innocent. I went on with the questions, seeing to it everybody got a turn to be nervous, but I couldn't hope for anything more than to learn their personalities.

I learned a lot, all of it bad. These people had no loyalty to anyone but themselves. Cantrell had never been anything but a meal ticket to them, and now they were assured of eating regular for the rest of their lives, and doing it in style at Kirkdale. Maybe they weren't vampires, but you don't have to be a vampire to be a bloodsucking freak. I didn't trust them and I didn't like them.

In between questions and answers, I stole a few looks at Mary Cantrell. What I saw made my insides turn into a prizewinning macrame exhibit. She thought they all loved her.

It was a nice afternoon, so I spent a couple of hours by myself, taking the sun and snooping around the gardens and the grounds. All the place needed to qualify as a national park was a souvenir stand and a couple of bears.

Cantrell's favorite roses held my attention for a long time. They were the color of blood an hour after it runs out of a wound. If you were building a house, you could use the thorns and save yourself the price of nails. I looked at those bushes and thought about them for a while, then I decided there was nothing in it for me. Instead, I covered the ground all around them. That's when I found it.

There are clues and there are clues. Some of them only require one look for your day to turn into Christmas. Some of them never say a word to you. This one was the silent type.

It was a piece of dental floss about four inches long.

I kneeled over it as if I was thinking about starting a religion. I didn't touch it for a while, just studied it in its natural state. It was twisted a little, and muddy, but its waxy surface shone in a couple of spots, so there was no mistaking what it was.

After a while, I picked it up and took inventory. I'd been right the first time. It was about four inches long. Johnson & Johnson. Flavored with cinnamon. And maybe with something else. I hoped the brown stains were only mud.

I needed two things very badly, a Baggie and a drink. I only had

one of them on me at the moment; so I carefully put the dental floss in my wallet, where there was nothing to contaminate it, and pulled the bottle from its holster under my jacket.

"Are you going to keep that all to yourself?" a voice said softly behind me. It was the kind of voice that makes a man turn around with his eyes wide open.

It was Dracula's daughter, Elvira Hawkins, Mary Cantrell's personal maid and companion. She was wearing a black uniform that didn't insult her figure. It didn't insult my imagination, either. I'd had other things on my mind back in the drawing room, but I'd noticed her. You couldn't miss a profile like that, even in black, maybe especially in black, but I can concentrate on my job when I have to. Now I'd put in a few hours, interviewed possible suspects, inspected the scene of the murder, and filed what could be a clue. I was on my break anyway. I handed over the bottle.

She took it and drank without wiping off the top. That did something to me. I didn't want to admit, even to myself, what it was.

"What did you want to see me about?" I said.

"I'm curious about who you are."

"I'm an insurance investigator. Sometimes I work with lawyers, too. It depends."

"No, you're not. You're not with any insurance company. Insurance investigators have better suits," she said. "So do guys who work with lawyers."

I didn't even blink. "You can't tell by the cut of the cloth," I told her.

"I can," she said. "Only one thing had me puzzled."

"What was that?"

"You don't wear a hat," she said. "Private investigators always wear hats."

I gave her my most winning smile.

"I have a hat. I hate it. I hire a guy to wear it for me."

We grinned at each other for a while.

Then I figured my break was over and I went back to work.

I put my hand out and she put the bottle in it.

"Okay," I said, "I'm an investigator, private or otherwise. Do you have something I might want to investigate, or were you just thirsty?"

At some point in your relationship, a woman who wears black is sure to turn nasty. I've learned that over the years.

"Listen, you shamus or shaman or shogun or whatever you guys

are called, you've only horned in here where you're not needed or wanted. Kirkdale has always been safe from people like you. Isn't it bad enough that Mr. Cantrell was bitten by a vampire and murdered right here where he should be safe, in the comfort of his own home? Poor Mary is in her room, crying her eyes out. I've spent my life trying to protect her from the harsh realities of life, just the way her father wanted me to. Now all this has happened. Please, leave her alone! Your help can only make life worse for her, even worse than her father's death has already made it. Leave her alone! Leave us all alone!"

She didn't even say goodbye, but she was nice to look at in that black uniform running up the hill to the house. The only thing that kept me from enjoying the view completely was the fact that neither Mary Cantrell nor I had said word one to the staff about vampires.

I took Mary Cantrell with me when I left that place. She protested a little because she didn't understand why I was so worried about her. I reminded her that she was paying me to tell her things like this, even if she didn't like them. Especially if she didn't like them. She said she'd come with me.

Hawkins saw us to the door, but I could tell from his face that he wasn't hoping we had a nice day.

We left in separate cars. It was a while before we reached civilization. When I saw a diner that looked as if it might have evolved enough to have a telephone, I signaled to Mary and pulled into the parking lot.

"Sit tight," I called across to her. She nodded, looking very unhappy but very brave.

I went in and found the phone and called Danny Lavender.

"I have some night work," I told him. "Meet me at the office at seven. Bring your fists."

When I went back to the parking lot, Mary Cantrell was gone. They'd left her car there, with the driver's door open, as a souvenir.

I called Danny Lavender again, then sat by the window in the diner drinking coffee. When I saw Danny's car roll into the parking lot, I signaled to the waitress and ordered two burgers.

He took the hat off but kept the glasses on when he sat down across from me. He didn't say a word, but the angle of his head

told me he was eager to hear about the case.

"This one could ruin your appetite," I told him. "Wait till we eat."

The burgers were exactly what I expected. I added another star to the rating of Joe's Place.

We even risked the coffee. It was going to be a long night.

When I told Danny everything that had happened, he still didn't say a word but he nodded three times during the story. When Danny Lavender nods once, that means he thinks the case is really bad. I'd never seen him nod three times. I waved for more coffee and this time I added reinforcements from my holster.

"We have to get her out of there," I said.

Danny Lavender nodded again.

It's like when you see a guy ahead of you on the highway pass an exit, then stop and back up. You don't do anything at first. You just stare at him, trying to comprehend the fact that he's really doing this thing.

That's how it is when you suddenly get a break in a case. It's like the sun deciding to shine in your window at midnight. I stood there on the steps of the diner, staring at Mary Cantrell's car. The same car she'd driven when she led the way up to Kirkdale. The car that had the widget for the gate.

An owl could have found the gate again in about two minutes. To me, every tree looks like every other tree. I like them all right, but they have a tendency to stand between me and where I'm going. When we got to where I thought we were close, we had to kill the headlights and cruise in the dark. It took over an hour to locate that gate in the pitch blackness, with Danny leaning on the widget all the way.

Once we were inside, Danny rigged the widget to keep the gate open while I turned the car around so it faced out toward the road. I like to leave a place quiet and quick.

The moon was high above us by the time we hiked up to the house. When we reached the edge of the woods on one side, Danny pointed up. The whole house was in darkness, just a black shape against the black sky, except for a light in one window on the second floor. While I stood there, trying to convince my lungs to go back to work, I saw a shadow pass the window, then pass it again. I knew that shadow. It was Mary Cantrell.

Then I saw another shadow in the same window. I knew that shadow, too. I would have known it anywhere.

It was Elvira Hawkins, and she was guarding the prize.

"It's my bet the door isn't locked," I whispered to Danny. "They'll rely on the gate."

He nodded. I couldn't tell if that was good or bad.

We walked up to the house, opened the door, and went in.

I put my hand on Danny's arm to hold him back a minute. I was afraid the pounding of my heart would sound as subtle as jungle drums in that silent house. When the noise slacked off a little, we started forward toward the stairs.

The noise of my heart drowned out the sound of footsteps behind me. The guy had a good grip on my Adam's apple from behind before I even knew what was happening. Nobody made a sound. The guy wouldn't let go. I saw Danny's dark shape turning toward me. I gave up trying to move the guy's arm from my throat, and reached inside my jacket to the holster. That holster has served me well. It earned another polishing that night. My hand closed around the neck of the bottle and eased it out. My throat was starting to hurt from where the guy was inconsiderately squeezing it, so I swung the bottle behind me and smashed the heavy in the mouth.

He went down like a thousand-year-old redwood, muttering, "My teeth, my teeth," but I didn't care. I came around in a hurry and hit him again, hard. He stopped worrying about his teeth then.

The jungle drums were going again pretty good after that, but we started back up the stairs.

At the top, I looked down the corridor. A blade of light was coming from under one of the doors. It was Mary Cantrell's room.

We went in there like a pair of matched bullocks.

Mary was sitting on the edge of the bed. Standing over her was Elvira Hawkins, and she was smiling.

Danny and I couldn't even manage a grin.

Beside the bed was an intravenous stand and hanging from the top of it was a clear plastic I.V. bag. I saw some others on the night table. There was about a mile of plastic tubing, too, all stretched out and hooked up and ready to go. Elvira had one end of it in her hand, and attached to the tube was a hypodermic needle. She was bending over Mary's arm as she smiled, taking aim with that needle, and that's the way she froze, looking up at us.

For a while, everybody just looked things over, not saying anything. There wasn't much to say. I figured there were two possibilities. One was that the vampires were packing refreshments for a picnic, but I didn't like that one too much. The other was more

terrible than I had time to think about just then.

I said, "Helló, Elvira."

Her smile turned real nasty and she snarled at me.

"We're onto your little game," I said, very polite and respectful, "but the game just came to an end."

She straightened up then. I couldn't tell if she was still snarling because Danny Lavender was wrapping one of his hands around her head.

Then Mary Cantrell was in my arms and I wasn't thinking about Elvira any more.

She sobbed for a while and kept turning those eyes up to me. I gave her all the time she needed to get herself calm again. Danny kept himself busy with Elvira.

After a while, I told Danny I thought we'd overstayed our welcome and maybe it was time we left. Elvira looked very subdued. Danny had her tied up securely with the plastic tubing.

"So long, sister," I said.

She mumbled something but I couldn't catch it. The gag in her mouth didn't improve her diction.

Mary was steady on her feet as we went down the stairs. She didn't need any coaxing to leave the house this time.

At the bottom of the stairs, the heavy we'd left there was starting to come around and maybe even remember his own name. I advised him to see a dentist, then hit him again with the bottle so he'd have to.

We didn't dawdle after that and got across the open patch okay and into the woods. It was a lot easier getting down the driveway than it had been hiking up. When we finally saw the car sitting there in the moonlight, with the trees politely standing aside for us to leave, I figured we were home free.

We piled into the front seat quick and got out of there.

I liked having Mary Cantrell safe on the seat beside me, and I liked having Danny Lavender protecting her on the other side.

About a mile down the road, I switched on the headlights and picked up some speed.

From behind me in the back seat, a voice said, "Do drive carefully, Mr. Kendall. We wouldn't want to have an accident now."

It happens like that sometimes. I'm the most suspicious person I know. I even know some credit managers who aren't as suspicious as I am. I always check the back seat of the car. I didn't check it that time.

Danny and I had never rehearsed it, but Dracula back there, in the person of Hawkins, he of the beauteous daughter, didn't have time to figure that out.

I swerved the car sharp to the left, then sharp to the right, then left again. Danny had had his arm across the back seat, behind Mary's shoulders, because otherwise his own shoulders wouldn't have let the three of us in the seat. While I was making the car imitate an eggbeater, Danny planted his elbow in the vampire's face.

I heard Mary Cantrell gasp beside me, but I didn't have time to think about that. I screeched the car to a stop and threw on the brake.

Danny was already climbing over the seat into the back and making sounds like he wasn't having a good time doing it. His compensation was that Drac wasn't having a good time, either. I joined him in the back as soon as the car stopped rocking.

He had the situation in hand already. I like a guy who thinks ahead and comes prepared for emergencies. Danny had kept half of that plastic tubing, and he was already getting Drac done up tight enough for special delivery.

"Put your finger there," Danny said, and pointed with his chin.

I put my finger there and held it till he pulled the last of the tubing tight.

"Okay," I said, and began to think maybe I'd take up breathing again.

"Look out!" Mary Cantrell cried.

I wished she'd been a little more precise, but in a second I figured out what was worrying her. The vampire was going for Danny Lavender's throat.

Danny snatched his head back just in time, but he continued leaning his arm against the vampire's chest.

"His teeth," Mary said. "You have to watch out for his teeth."

She was right.

Danny looked at me, without releasing his hold.

"Here," I said. I reached inside my jacket for the holster.

"Sorry I can't offer you a drink," I told Hawkins, showing him the bottle.

He said two words to me then that I don't want to write down. I used the back of my hand twice to make him regret each of them. After that he didn't say anything. It's not easy to talk with the neck of a booze bottle shoved down your throat and an angry Eskimo holding it in place.

After our little disagreement with Hawkins on the subject of neck-biting, we decided to sit out the rest of the night in the car and not risk driving while somebody held onto him. We found a road down to the beach and parked there, waiting for daylight. If everything went according to Hoyle, the vampire was going to go into hibernation at dawn's early light.

Danny Lavender was in the back seat, nursing our friend with the bottle. Mary Cantrell stretched out across the front seat, saying she only needed to rest her eyes for a bit, and dozed off right away.

That left me.

I spend a lot of time thinking things over. It happens I have a lot of time in which to do that.

Now I was thinking about vampires, and I didn't like the thoughts I was having. In my business you get used to having new thoughts, learning new things, but sometimes you have to learn something you didn't really want to know. The worst of it was the fact that I'd already been believing in vampires and acting on that belief for most of the day. And the day had been pretty long.

In any prison, fellow cons will call a truce and gang up very cosily to erase a child molester or a traitor. I wondered what that fraternity would do to a vampire.

But then a vampire could never be put in a prison. That was going to be kind of a roadblock for me.

I listened to the ocean some more and wished I could slow my heartbeat down to its rhythm. I kept myself occupied by kicking some sand with the toe of my shoe. It didn't help my thinking any.

I knew I couldn't kill him. I've seen lots of murders and I know lots of interesting ways to go about it, but stakes through the heart just aren't in my line. I couldn't turn him over to the police. I couldn't kill him. I couldn't let him go. I had a real problem on my hands.

I kicked the sand some more but it just blew away on the breeze, like all my thoughts.

"I'm so sorry I got you involved in this," Mary Cantrell said softly at my side.

I turned my head and looked at her. People tell me I deal out the words pretty sharp, sometimes sharp enough to cut, but I didn't know what to be saying now. Also, I kept my hands in my pockets. If I'd taken them out, I might have been tempted to violate the client-investigator relationship. I looked at her, standing there in the silvery moonlight on the rippled sand of the beach, her skirt

moving softly around her in the breeze from the ocean. She had her face tilted up to me. Those eyes. I looked away.

"I'll think of something," I said. I could hardly hear my own voice.

"I mean it," she said. She touched my arm with the tips of her fingers. "You're a good man, Mike Kendall. I can see that. You've already risked your life for me, and that's more than any fee can ever repay you for. I know you deal all the time with . . . with terrible people and the terrible things they do to each other. It must be awful, having to face that every day, having to face that knowledge. I've just learned something about that myself, so I understand a little of what you must feel."

I waved one hand to brush it all away. I didn't move the arm she was touching.

"This must be the worst thing you've ever had to deal with," she said. I could hear the sadness in her voice.

"I've seen worse," I said.

I hadn't.

I felt her hand tighten on my arm. I watched the ocean as if I expected Russian submarines to surface any minute. "I'll get us out of this," I told her. "I'll find a way."

"I know you will."

I spent some time trying to think of a way. I couldn't.

"Mike," she said. Just like that.

I turned to face her and we moved closer together. Nothing moved on the beach except the eternal ocean.

When we kissed, I could taste the salt on her lips.

Dawn can be beautiful in California, with the first pink light streaking up over the mountains, almost as beautiful as the red and gold and purple of sunset over the Pacific. This dawn wasn't beautiful at all. It was just gray and overcast and misty, but it was the best I'd ever seen.

The part of me that's mean wished I could take credit for solving the problem, but I couldn't. The problem solved itself.

About the time the first light began to touch the beach, the vampire in the back seat began making some unpleasant noises deep in his throat. He kept it up and after a while I heard Danny Lavender grunt. That wasn't a good sign, but if Danny had needed help, I would have known. Mary had gone back to sleep, stretched out like a child on the front seat of the car. I was still watching the ocean.

Then Hawkins started coughing as if he might choke, and I wondered if maybe Danny Lavender was forgetting his own strength. Besides, I was very attached to that particular bottle and I didn't want to lose it down the gullet of a vampire. I went back to see what was going on.

Hawkins had his eyes wide open and they were darting around in every direction, except he kept blinking madly, as if somebody were shining a spotlight into them. I thought he looked pretty pale, too. He was definitely not in the pink of health.

His tossing around and gurgling woke up Mary Cantrell, and the three of us studied him. I could see Mary's face filled with the most terrible sadness of all, the knowledge that someone you thought had loved you has now betrayed you.

Then something changed in the noises Hawkins was making. I wasn't expecting it from him so at first I didn't realize what it was. Then I caught it. There's a special kind of sound a man makes when he's gagged, not just the usual protests and faked noises of choking, but a sound that says clearly, if you've heard it before, that the subject has something to say and that maybe he's going to sing the song you want to hear. Danny Lavender was looking at me, waiting for a signal. He'd heard it, too.

"I think he wants to say something," Mary Cantrell said.

I looked at her and let my admiration show.

"Okay," I told Danny. "Uncork him."

Danny removed the bottle from the vampire's mouth, not taking too much care to avoid banging the bottle on his fangs. The vampire winced. I didn't like myself too much for it, but I enjoyed seeing that.

"You are all so foolish," were the vampire's first words.

The jungle drums started up again in my chest.

"So foolish," he said again, and started laughing. It was a weak laugh, but it was laughter. It made Mary Cantrell cry. I hit him for doing that.

His eyes glared at me, but the smile never left his face.

His voice was fading fast and his face was going more pale by the second. He was dying and suddenly we all knew it. But he was still smiling because he knew something else the rest of us didn't know.

Then he told us what he had to say and it was the worst thing I'd ever heard.

He told us everything, the whole ugly story. Nobody interrupted

while he spoke. Dawn was getting brighter by the second, and he didn't have much time left.

"I want you to know this," he said. "Knowing that you have this knowledge will be the last and the greatest pleasure of my life.

"I know what happened in the bedroom upstairs. I know you left Elvira there, but rest assured that she has gotten herself free by now. She was always a resourceful girl. But she is not a vampire.

"You look surprised. No, she is not a vampire, nor are any of the other staff at Kirkdale, so you're safe on that score.

"It is true that I was planning to make them vampires, beginning with my dear Elvira, of course. And I was going to use your blood for that purpose, young lady. But that doesn't matter now. They will simply have to look out for themselves from now on in the lowly way of puny humans with limited human powers. And Elvira, I'm sure, will do well for herself. A good-looking girl can always do well in sunny California, eh?

"No, I was the only vampire at Kirkdale. And now I am dying. You have me and it seems obvious there is nothing I can do to escape. My powers are weakening. With every ray of dawning light that shines, I grow weaker. In minutes, I shall be dead."

His eyes were losing their gleam by the second, but as he looked at each of the three of us there was still a fierce light burning in them. And there was something else, too. There was amusement. I knew that with his last breath he was going to tell us something we didn't want to hear.

He looked at Danny Lavender a moment, then he looked at me, then he let his gaze come to rest on Mary Cantrell.

"I bit your father, young lady. Had you forgotten that? Oh, his blood tasted good. Quite rich and aristocratic and—"

"Stop it!" I said. "That's enough! You're having the last laugh anyway, so just get on with the story." I made a fist and showed it to him.

He smiled, but it looked as if it took almost the last bit of life left in him. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. He was still looking at Mary.

"Your father," he said. "I bit him. Now your father is a vampire!"

His eyes blazed for a second, but that was the end. California's vampire population went down by one.

The trouble was, California's vampire population had also gone up by one the day before.

Mary Cantrell's father was a vampire and we had to track him down before he killed others.

And if we found him, what were we going to do with him?

I didn't know. All I knew for sure right then was that Mary Cantrell was sobbing against my shoulder and I hated a world in which someone like her could be made to cry.

Pretty soon, the sun started doing ugly things to the vampire's body. Nobody said a word while we buried what was left. Then we got in the car and went away from that place.

5

We spent a little time going back up in the hills to the diner to get Danny's car and my own. They were still there. I hoped that might mean my luck was beginning to turn, but I knew better than to hope it too much.

Mary said she could drive her own car back to L.A. and my office. I let her. She needed some time by herself, but I could also see the set of her jaw and the old determination in her eyes. She'd had a bad night but she was going to be okay.

I told Danny Lavender to meet me at the office at dusk. I figured he'd be stirring again about the time Jonathan David Cantrell would be up and about. It was going to be a long day. But the day wasn't going to be as long as the next night.

Back at the office, I found Mary Cantrell sound asleep on the couch in my waiting room. That was more use than the couch had seen in years. It wasn't much but I was glad it was there for her. I reminded myself to dust it sometime. You never know when you're going to need a couch.

I locked the office when I left. I wanted to find Mary Cantrell there, safe and sound, when I got back.

My first stop was the local booze emporium. I wasn't taking any chances, so I bought a new bottle for my holster, plus another couple for good measure. It's a comforting feeling to know you're packing plenty of armament going into battle.

Then I went to Joe's Place and drank four cups of breakfast, black. I'm not usually an early type and Joe looked at me funny when I came in, but he knew enough to leave me alone and just keep the coffee coming.

I tried to think everything over again and figure where this road was leading us, but nothing made any sense till I started on the third cup. Coffee is important in my work. I think very highly of countries that grow it.

When Joe poured the fifth cup, he put a packet of Alka-Seltzer

on the table beside the saucer. Joe is a good man.

I hated what I was thinking. I knew it was the only answer, the only way we were going to stop Jonathan David Cantrell, but I hated it anyway.

She was awake when I got there and one look at her face told me she'd figured it out, too. It didn't take a second look to tell me she was ready to go through with it.

"You know what has to be done," I said.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"It can't be helped," she said. "I can do whatever I have to."

"You'll be risking your life. I wish there were some other way." She shook her head. We both knew there wasn't.

Even a decent citizen who doesn't believe in vampires knows a lot about them. For one thing, they're creatures of habit, and that's the key to getting them. That was the first thing I'd realized, and that had led Mary and me to this conversation. I discounted all that stuff you hear about mirrors and garlic and dirt from the vampire's grave. Maybe it's true, maybe it's not. I didn't care. I only cared about what mattered most. And what mattered most and first was finding him.

In order to find him, we'd have to set a trap. But what do you lure a vampire with? Blood? Too easy. Everybody you pass on the street has blood. No, you have to use the one thing that pleases a vampire most, a chance to hurt the one person that vampire has most loved in life.

We were going to have to use Mary Cantrell herself as the bait to catch her own father.

That was pretty bad, about as bad as things can be. But there was still something else.

"I can't kill him," Mary said quietly. "And we can't just let him die, the way Hawkins did. I've already faced my father's death once. I can't face it again. We'll have to figure out something else."

"Yeah," I said. "I know. I just don't know what."

I didn't, either.

We didn't talk much during the day. Mary spent some time looking out the window, but it wasn't much nicer out than it was in. I kept myself busy studying the scars on my desk.

About one o'clock I had an idea.

"Tell me about your father," I said. "Tell me everything, whether you told it to me before or not. What I'm looking for is the things he cared most about. Besides you."

She started talking, telling me all sorts of things, the kinds of things that are awkward to talk about after somebody has died. Everything seems trivial in the light of the person's death. I listened carefully. I couldn't afford to think any of it was trivial, because somewhere in what Mary was telling me was the clue we needed.

I couldn't hear it. I listened, but I couldn't hear it.

"He had a lot of money," I said. "Did he give any of it away?"

"Yes," Mary told me. "He was very generous and supported a large number of charities."

"Who got the most?"

She thought about that. "There were all the usual charities," she said slowly, "but there was one that he was especially fond of. Yes, I think they may have gotten even more than the others."

I waited.

"It was the zoo."

"The zoo?" I said.

"The zoo in Santa Bonita. It was only a small zoo for many years, and of course overshadowed by the San Diego Zoo. But the group of directors there wanted to expand it. I don't know if they went to my father or if he first approached them, but I know he gave them a lot of money in recent years." She looked at me. "A lot of money. He loved animals almost as much as he loved flowers. I'm sorry I forgot to mention that before."

"It's okay," I said. "We've got it now. Or half of it, anyway." I stood up. "Let's take a ride."

"Where are we going?"

"The zoo," I told her.

We got there just before closing time, and the guard at the gate didn't want to let us in. Mary asked him to call the head office and tell them she was there. I don't know if it was her voice or her eyes that got him to make the call. He was back in less than a minute, and in two minutes more that guard was riding us around on his motor cart, showing us all the sights.

I was looking for something, but I wouldn't know what it was until I spotted it.

After about fifteen minutes, we'd seen everything there was to

see but I still hadn't seen what I was looking for.

"Let's go around again," I told the guard. He was pretty cheerful about cooperating. Overtime is good money.

We went a little distance and then I told him to stop.

"What's that?" I asked him.

He glanced over where I was pointing. "Not finished yet," he said.

I put my hand on his shoulder. He looked at me and I let him read my face.

"Oh," he said. "You asked me what it is, didn't you? Right. Well, in about a week's time, it's going to be the new World of Night exhibit."

I didn't want to look at Mary Cantrell.

"Tell me about it," I said.

"Well, you remember how they used to have, you know, the snake house and the rodent exhibit and like that? But it didn't work out so good because all those things sleep all day long and only go out hunting for food at night. Kind of like the graveyard shift of the animal kingdom. . . . Do you get it?"

I looked at him some more.

"Right," he said. "So in a World of Night exhibit, what they do is, they turn around day and night by putting all the lights on a different schedule. Fools the animals, see? When people are here in the daytime, it's dark inside, kind of like moonlight, but the animals think it's nighttime and they're all up and going about their business. Then at night, real night, when there's nobody in the zoo to see them, the lights are on in the exhibit and the animals all go to sleep. Works out fine."

"When is it supposed to open?"

"Next week. Everything is done except the finishing touches. And, of course, they have to bring the animals in. They'll start doing that tomorrow."

"What's it called?" I asked him.

"I told you that. The World of Night."

"Any other name?"

"Oh, you mean like a benefactor? Yeah, some guy gave a few million bucks to build it and they put his name on it to be official. Boy, some people just don't know what to be doing with their money. Building a new home for a bunch of rats and snakes. Boy!"

"Yeah," I said. "I know how you feel. Ain't it something?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Yeah. Listen, the lady here needs a private room with a telephone."

“Oh, sure,” he said right away, and I could tell from the look on his face that he was suddenly remembering what the front office had told him about showing this particular lady around.

“Yep, some people with money are real generous, you know that?” he said.

“I know,” I said. “The telephone?”

“Right over there in the main office. I’ll show you the way.”

“You know what I’m thinking,” I said to Mary Cantrell when we were alone.

She looked at me. She knew.

I called Danny Lavender first and told him to meet us there as soon as possible.

I didn’t have to tell Mary who to call.

She got the chairman of the Board of Directors on the phone and told him what we needed. She also told him that if anything ever went wrong or if a word of this ever leaked out, that zoo would never see another cent of Cantrell money. On the other hand, if everything went well, she thought that perhaps in a couple of years it might be time to expand the zoo’s facilities further. She also allowed as how she was very pleased with the work he was doing himself, and that work as good as his deserved to be rewarded.

Money talks. It just talks a different language from the one I learned as a child. I listened to it the way I’d listen to somebody talking French.

Mary Cantrell was terrific. She didn’t even have trouble reassuring the chairman that her father was quite well but out of town for an extended period.

She put the chairman on hold, went to the door, and called in the security guard. He put the phone to his ear and listened for a few minutes and said, “Yes, sir,” a few times.

When he put the phone down again, he looked very respectful.

“I’ll have the keys to the World of Night for you right away,” he said, and went out of there like a shot.

I thought it would break my heart to see that brave little girl sitting out there on that stone wall by herself in the darkness. She just sat there, waiting, her eyes searching all around. I felt like an oaf, clumsy and helpless. I knew from the angle of his head that Danny Lavender felt the same way. We were about a hundred feet away from her on each side. We waited. That’s all we could do.

I kept thinking what a long shot it was. Maybe he wouldn't come here at all. Maybe he was off in some other place right now, sucking somebody's blood. Maybe he was, but I couldn't think about that now. We were betting he'd come here and we were using his daughter's life to bet with and I had to concentrate on that.

And then I saw him.

I was looking at the second vampire I'd ever seen. That's a lot of vampires when you didn't even believe in them thirty-six hours before. You learn quick in this business to keep an open mind.

He was stalking her. I can't describe it any other way.

She saw him about the same time I did: I looked over to where Danny was hiding but I couldn't see him. I wished I could, I would have felt better, but I figured he was up to something and that was okay.

I looked back at the vampire. He was standing behind a tree, watching her. Then he moved forward, to another tree. It was dark, but I thought I saw his shoulders shaking. He was laughing. He was laughing because he was going to wreak the ultimate damage on the very person he most loved.

I thought about the ironies of life for a second. Then there was no more time to think because the vampire was moving closer to Mary again.

I wished I knew where Danny Lavender was.

Danny and I had tried to work out a plan as soon as he'd met us there. I've mixed it up with the best of them—that is to say, the worst—and so has Danny, but we couldn't figure out how to handle this case. Clobber him, was the best I could come up with. My holster was loaded and Danny had his fists. We had no other weapons. Besides, anything else we might have used would have been about as useful as hair on a golf ball. We were going to play it as it came, and never mind the risks. Anyway, Mary Cantrell was taking the biggest risk of all.

I watched the vampire moving closer to her. The jungle drums were going a mile a minute.

There was still no sign of Danny. I kept wishing I knew where he was.

Then Mary Cantrell was standing up to face her father.

"Hello, Daddy," she said. Her voice sounded steady.

He laughed, right out loud, gloating.

"I know what you want from me, Daddy, but—"

Now he threw his head back in the moonlight and laughed at the night like a jackal. It was the worst sound I'd ever heard. The

moonlight shone on his fangs. He started reaching for her.

I stepped out from hiding.

"Hey!" I shouted.

He swung around, distracted for what turned out to be a crucial second. He snarled and took a step toward me. I was glad to see Mary move backwards, away from him.

I didn't know exactly what I was going to do, but I went toward him anyway.

"Got the time?" I said.

He threw his head back again to laugh but the laugh was cut off short. We found out at the same time where Danny Lavender had been.

In that same second, the vampire turned even whiter than he'd been to start with and spun around in confusion, momentarily off balance. That moment was just enough for me to race across the pathway and caress the back of his head a couple of times with my favorite weapon. The vampire didn't go out completely, but he went down for the count without further protest.

I wasn't surprised that even the vampire was frightened for a second. I'd be willing to bet that anybody would be pretty frightened if nearly three hundred pounds of albino Eskimo suddenly dropped from a branch above him, naked in the moonlight except for his white cotton Fruit of the Looms, and yelling at the top of his voice some Eskimo words that he probably didn't learn at his mother's knee.

We didn't waste any time. Danny grabbed for the vampire's arms and I picked up his feet and we ran for the back door of the World of Night. Mary had kept her head through it all and had the door open wide for us.

We didn't have to carry him very far to the room we'd picked out, but I thought we'd never get there in time. I kept looking at those fangs.

Then we had him inside.

"Kiss the vampire goodbye," I told Mary Cantrell.

She did. On the forehead.

For her sake, I would have liked to put him down a little more gently, but there wasn't time for that. We dumped him and got out of there and locked the door behind us.

Mary slept on the couch in my waiting room that night. I slept with my face on the desk. The scars were rough to sleep on but none of that mattered.

When I woke up, Mary Cantrell was standing in front of the desk.

All she said was, "Thank you."

I waved a hand.

We went across to Joe's Place. Joe took one quick look at her and was very impressed.

"I just pray that it's a permanent solution," she said quietly after a while.

"It's as permanent as we can make it," I told her. "The Cantrell Foundation will endow the World of Night in perpetuity, with a provision that no changes can be made in the building without the Foundation's approval. Except for the new wall sealing off that room and a slight rearrangement inside the building. And if he ever does get out, it'll be in the daylight."

"Yes," she said. There was nothing else to say.

We went back to my office for a minute and she got out her checkbook and wrote me a check.

Then I saw her to the door and silently declared the case closed.

When I looked at the check, I saw it was for more than my fee. I split the difference with Danny Lavender. I owed him a lot.

That was the last I ever heard of Mary Cantrell, except for a note I had from her a few weeks later. She told me she had fixed things with the lawyers and her father was now officially deceased. The servants had all decamped for parts unknown, and now she was alone in the world. She was taking the money she inherited and going away someplace to start a new life where nothing would ever remind her of the past. I never saw her again.

The city is a jungle and I live in it every day, and like the real jungle, it's filled with wild beasts. But unlike those beasts, I have a memory. I know that Mary Cantrell is safe now and I know that she kissed me that night on the beach with the moonlight shining on her hair.

I must write myself a note to remember that sometime, to think about it. It'll be like a vacation. It'll be nice.

Before Something Happens

by Donald Olson



Illustration by Jim Ceribello

Gwen Tercott was the sort of woman who functioned best in a crisis; decisive by nature, bossy by habit, she had mastered the Art of Coping over several years as an elementary-school principal, and though many found her arrogant, pushy, and lacking in sympathy, no one could accuse her of not being there when she was needed. Certainly not her daughter, and from the hysterical pitch of Sueann's voice on the phone that night, it was clear that Gwen was needed.

As she dashed through the rain to her car she asked herself why Sueann's crises must always occur at the most inopportune moments—Gwen had looked forward to that political debate on TV—and in the foulest weather. After gathering all day, the full force of the storm had broken just before nine, pelting rain and sharp bursts of thunder, making the long drive to Sueann's house all the more nerve-jangling.

Sueann's car was in the driveway, that hideous buttercup-yellow VW, and wasn't it just like Sueann to neglect to roll up the windows? Gwen took time to do this before hurrying to the shelter of the aluminum awning over the front door. The door was ajar and she pushed it open, calling out as she en-

tered. No sign of Sueann, but the TV was on. Gwen grimaced at the program, one of those nighttime series Sueann delighted in. She promptly turned it off.

"Sueann? I'm here. Where are you?"

Sueann drifted into the room looking, Gwen quickly noticed, perfectly awful in those sloppy jeans and baggy sweater, her hair damp, limp, and uncombed; her manner, however, appeared more distracted than distraught, although she had obviously been crying. The room looked as much in disarray as Sueann; nothing unusual about that and Gwen confined her reaction to one sweeping glance of pained disapproval.

"I shut your car windows," said Gwen. "Couldn't you see it was going to rain? For heaven's sake sit down, you look frightful. Are you ill?"

Sueann dropped into a chair and lit a cigarette. The smoke didn't go anywhere near Gwen, who nevertheless made the obligatory fanning gesture of distaste. It remained a constant mystery to her how a child could be so much like one parent and so little like the other: Sueann's untidiness, her lack of emotional control, her habits—even many of her gestures—were all unpleasantly remindful of Winthrop; it was

as if by some conscious effort of will the girl had obliterated every trace of her mother's influence, like a child defiantly erasing the day's lesson from the blackboard while the teacher's back was turned.

"I don't suppose I need to ask what it's all about," said Gwen tartly. "Stewie, of course."

"Yes, but I don't want to talk about it, Mother. I want—"

"Oh, you just want to ignore it, is that it? Look at you, he's turned you into a nervous wreck. You're even trembling. If you think I came all the way over here on a night like this just to hold your hand, you're quite mistaken. I said to myself in the car, if this is what I think it is, I've *had* it. This is the end. Now if you refuse to take positive action, once and for all . . ."

A glazed look of resignation came over Sueann's pretty but colorless face as she let the words roll over her, finally shutting them off with a wearily impatient protest. "Mother, I tried all your ideas of positive action. I had him arrested how many times? I've had my phone number changed three times. It's been unlisted for months, but none of it's done a bit of good."

"I'd still love to know how he managed to get an unlisted number. I suppose he must know someone at the phone com-

pany—or maybe he broke in here when you weren't home. I wouldn't put it past him."

"He's never done that. He wouldn't dare."

Gwen sniffed. "That lunatic would dare do anything. He's unstable and he's dangerous. When did he call? What did he say? Have you called the police?"

Sueann shook her head. "What would have been the use?" She suddenly jumped up and moved to the window, parting the curtains to peer out into the rain. Gwen's eyes followed her anxiously. Something wrong here, she thought. She would have preferred hysterics, that she could cope with; this air of dazed remoteness was something new and even more disturbing. Then all at once she realized.

"What are you looking at? Dear God, he threatened you! Don't lie to me, Sueann, I want the truth. That man threatened you, didn't he? Did he say he was coming over here? Is that why you called me?"

Disagreeable as the prospect was, Gwen savored the vision of a confrontation. Oh, to be able to tell that odious creature to his face exactly what she thought of him!

Sueann dropped the curtain and turned away from the window, rubbing her hands to-

gether in a compulsive gesture of coldness or strung-out nerves. Now Gwen sprang to her feet. "Any coffee made? No? Well, why don't you make some, it'll keep your hands busy. I always say if you *do* something, not just stand around moaning and groaning and wringing your hands . . . If he threatened to come out here—"

"He's not coming *out* here, Mother."

"Then why are you so tense? And don't tell me you're not. I want to know *precisely* what he said to get you in such a state. If he did threaten you, it might make a big difference in court. We might be able to convince that idiot judge that the man's a menace. He's got to be made to stop all this before something happens. Something really awful."

"He didn't threaten me, Mother. He's never threatened me. I wish he had. Anything would be better than that endless, whining love talk. I love you, I love you, I love you. Always the same thing over and over and over again." She pressed both hands to her head as if to shut out the memory of those mad, persistent pleas.

Gwen looked coldly disdainful. "Love! Love and lunacy, the same thing. Even Shakespeare said so. Certainly in *his* case. He's sick and he's dangerous

and I can tell by your face this time he's done something really inexcusable. He *did* threaten you. Don't tell me he didn't. Oh, I knew from the start what he was like. I warned you, didn't I? He was bad business from the very beginning."

This was not strictly true even if Gwen had said it so often she probably did believe she had pegged Stewart Hughes as a sickie the first time she met him. That was four years ago, just before Sueann and Stewie became engaged. At the time, he had in fact seemed a likable, decent, socially unobjectionable young man, although too wishy-washy and too careless in his habits to satisfy Gwen's demanding standards. Too many different jobs in too few years had at first implied no more than the faltering attempts of an indecisive youth to get his feet planted on the right path. Gwen, however, soon decided it was not his feet but his head that lacked direction. Self-righteously believing she had made all the allowances she could be expected to make as a prospective mother-in-law, she methodically set out to convince Sueann she would be making a ruinous mistake by marrying Stewie. He wanted someone to lean on and Sueann, Gwen had tried to impress upon her, was too much of a leaner

herself. "I refuse to stand by and see you wreck your life. He'll turn out just like your father, take all he can and then leave you high and dry."

Sueann broke the engagement. Gwen rejoiced, never dreaming that would be only the start of the trouble. Stewie refused to accept rejection. He kept showing up at Sueann's door, even bothered her at the veterinarian's office where she worked as a receptionist-secretary. Twice Sueann relented, in the face of Gwen's outraged disapproval. Twice she again broke off with Stewie. The situation worsened. Stewie became a serious nuisance. He would show up in the middle of the night, pounding on Sueann's door until she let him in. Finally Sueann yielded to her mother's advice: she signed a complaint and the police warned Stewie to stay away from her.

That's when the phone calls started. Gwen had no idea how long they had been going on before Sueann told her about them, but they were incessant, usually to the apartment but frequently to Sueann at work, and they followed the same pattern, always the same plea: *I love you, I won't give you up. All I want is to talk to you, make you understand. Won't you even talk to me?* The strain began to tell on Sueann, who by now was

obliged to admit that Stewie's behavior was not rational. She changed her phone number; it made no difference; even when it was unlisted Stewie somehow managed to get hold of it. Finally she signed another complaint. Stewie was arrested for aggravated harassment. The judge lectured him and slapped him with a two hundred dollar fine. The very next day the calls recommenced. Once more he was charged and landed in the county jail for thirty days. Briefly after that the calls ceased, then began again. They were never threatening, never obscene, merely obsessed, persistent. He was jailed again, then put on two year's probation. Punishment seemed only to encourage him, as if he were trying to demonstrate the depth of his ardor by enduring anything to prove his love to Sueann.

While Stewie was in jail for the third time, Sueann met Dale Zimmerman, a husky, blond stockbroker-trainee. Gwen approved. The couple became engaged, decided to live together. Gwen bought Sueann a little crackerbox house. Then Stewie began calling again. Dale said forget the cops. I'll handle that creep myself. He accosted Stewie outside the plant where he was currently employed and gave him a severe beating.

Stewie filed charges of assault. The brokerage house warned Dale not to become embroiled in such an incident again. Stewie resumed his phone calls. A more lenient judge decided jail was no answer: Stewie must agree to psychiatric counseling. When the calls continued, tension was created between Dale and Sueann; after one of their more tumultuous rows Dale moved out of the crackerbox house, the engagement was broken—Sueann's fault, according to Gwen. By then Sueann was on tranquilizers. Although sympathetic, her veterinarian employer found Sueann's work adversely affected by all these emotional disruptions: he felt obliged to dismiss her.

"You didn't take too many pills, did you, Sueann?" Gwen now demanded, wondering if this might account for Sueann's curiously indifferent attitude following that earlier spell of hysteria.

"No, Mother, I didn't. Now please. I don't want to talk about Stewie any more. That's not why I asked you to come over. Did I forget to ask you to bring your checkbook?"

"My checkbook! Oh, dear God, is that what this is all about? Has he demanded money from you?"

"No, Mother. Just be quiet for

a minute and listen to me. I want to get away. Now. Tonight. I'll go to a motel, somewhere, anywhere. But I can't stay here."

"Run away? Are you out of your mind, girl? You'd let that psychopathic nuisance drive you out of your own home? Oh, I don't believe this. Look, if it'll make you feel safer, you can come home with me tonight. Yes. That's what you must do. You must stay with me for a few days—until you get your nerves under control."

"Mother, that's the last place in the world I'd ever get my nerves under control!"

This outburst left Gwen momentarily stupefied, her brittle features set in a look of aggrieved injustice. "Well! I suppose you blame *me* for all this wretched business."

"I didn't say that. It's no one's fault. Not even Stewie's. Now I simply must get away, Mother. Can't you accept that? Maybe if I'd gone sooner . . ."

"Gone where, pray tell? And done what? You're scarcely the type, my dear child, to waltz off into the great beyond and make a life for yourself. And I could hardly come chasing after you to hold your hand when things went bad."

"I don't need anyone to hold my hand," retorted Sueann, rising tension once more giving a

sharp edge to her words. "You've always tried to make me believe I couldn't file my own fingernails if you weren't there to help me. Maybe if you'd just once given me a little credit—"

"Oh, so now I'm the heavy mother, am I? You *do* blame me. Just the way you've always blamed me for your father running off—oh, don't deny it. I'm not dumb. Just because you've always known better than to *express* your feelings doesn't mean I haven't the perception to know what goes through your mind. That look you get on your face every time I mention his name, oh, I know, I know."

Sueann brushed past her and headed for the bedroom, Gwen following. She saw the overnight bag on the bed, already half-packed. "Good heavens, you're serious. You really do imagine you can just up and run away."

Sueann began hastily clearing things from an open drawer and tossing them recklessly into the bag. Gwen stood there, hands on hips, a smugly superior look on her face. "You don't even know how to *pack*, for goodness sake. Yet you think you can just take off, like a bird. And how do you propose to live, as birds do?"

Tight-faced, Sueann flashed a defiant look at her mother.

"I was hoping you might advance me enough money for expenses until I've had a chance to think and decide what I want to do."

She dropped the nightdress she was holding and crossed to the window, which also faced the street. Gwen eyed her sharply. "I don't see why I should lift a finger to do anything for you when you can't even tell me the truth. You're as transparent as glass."

"Then I shouldn't *have* to tell you anything, should I, Mother?"

"I mean the way you keep looking out windows. You're scared out of your wits, it's plain to see. I insist you tell me what that lunatic said to you on the phone. He made threats, didn't he? I knew it would come to this sooner or later. Do you think Stewart Hughes is one of a kind? Don't you read the newspapers? Don't you hear about all the horrible things that happen every day right in this city? That man is *sick*, can't you get that through your head?"

Sueann glared at her. "Is he, Mother? Well, maybe I am, too. Did you ever think of that? The truth, you say. What *good* would it do to tell you the truth about anything? Least of all about yourself. Or about me. Or about Father. Would you even listen? Would you even *hear*? You

chased Father away. The best thing you could have done for me would have been to send me away. "Oh, no. I *needed* you. I clung to you. Baloney, Mother. You cling to *me*. You always have, ever since Dad went away. Well, now I have to go away. With or without your help."

A confusion of mind altogether uncharacteristic of Gwen left her somewhat at a loss as to how to deal with this new Sueann. "Oh, yes, you have to go away just because he's finally got to you. He's finally made you realize it's not safe to stay in your own home. You're just giving up. Can't you understand that *he* is the one who must be sent away, once and for all? He shouldn't be allowed to walk the streets. All right. If you haven't the gumption to stand up for your rights, than I shall have to do it for you. The first thing I'm going to do is call the police and have him picked up. Then I'm going to hire a first-class lawyer. Not one of these wishy-washy liberals. Then we'll see—"

"No, mother." Sueann's voice was ragged with strain. "I'm leaving, now, tonight. You must help me. For once in your life please do what I ask without asking questions. For once spare me the lecture—I know it by heart."

As she struggled to shut the

bag, her mother marched to the phone by the bed, picked it up, and dialed 911. When she'd spoken her piece, coolly and with forceful precision; she quietly replaced the phone and turned a look of triumphant satisfaction upon Sueann.

"Now I'm going to be sure all the doors are locked, which you didn't have the sense to do. The front door was wide open when I arrived. And when we know that monster is behind bars, you're going to come home with me. You should see yourself—totally unraveled."

A cold but at the same time pitying smile touched Sueann's face. "But nothing unravels you, does it, Mother? You're always in command of any situation. Always under control, right down to each and every strand of your hair. Oh, Mother, how I wish I *had* been able to talk to you. How I wish I *could* tell you the truth. But it's too late now. It's been too late for years. Well, I hope you're able to face the truth when it hits you head-on."

Gwen smirked. "Please don't try to be profound, my dear. It simply isn't in you." She glanced contemptuously at the bag on the bed. "Transparent as glass. You *forgot* to ask me to bring my checkbook. How convenient. Who on earth do you think you're fooling? It's pathetic. As

if packing a bag is any more than a futile, childish gesture to get attention. Actually to go away would require you to make a decision, and you've never made a decision on your own in your life."

With an impudent smile and a false brightness of tone Sueann said: "There's always a first time, Mother dear."

Before Gwen could reply there came the sound of a car pulling into the graveled drive. Gwen's hand flew to her lips as her body stiffened. She flung an accusing glance at Sueann, who seemed oblivious of anything but what she was doing.

"It's too soon for the police. It must be *him*." She rushed from the room to make sure the doors were all locked, then returned: "Now you listen to me, missy. You stay right where you are. I'll talk to him. He won't be able to break the chain on the door. And you get on the phone and call the police. *Now*. Tell them he's here."

Sueann barely smiled. "Wrong, Mother. It's not Stewie."

"We'll see about that."

Sueann went on with her packing as Gwen walked boldly

out of the room, waited for the knock, and then cautiously unlatched the door on its chain.

Sueann was right. It was not Stewie. It *was* the police. Gwen quickly admitted them but had no sooner opened her mouth when they interrupted her.

"Sueann Tercott?"

Gwen brought her head up, her tone icily imperious. "Of course I'm not. I'm her mother. She's in the other room."

"I'm right here," said Sueann from the doorway where she stood calmly holding the overnight bag, her manner wholly unperturbed.

"We've just come from Stewart Hughes's apartment," said one of the officers. "He's dead."

Gwen uttered a strangled gasp. Her eyes went blank, then slowly fastened on Sueann's face.

Sueann looked deeply into her mother's eyes. "I tried to make him listen, but he wouldn't. He just wouldn't listen. He's like you, Mother. He just refused to listen. I had to do it, there was no other way to end it all. You were wrong about me, Mother. You see, I am capable of making a decision."

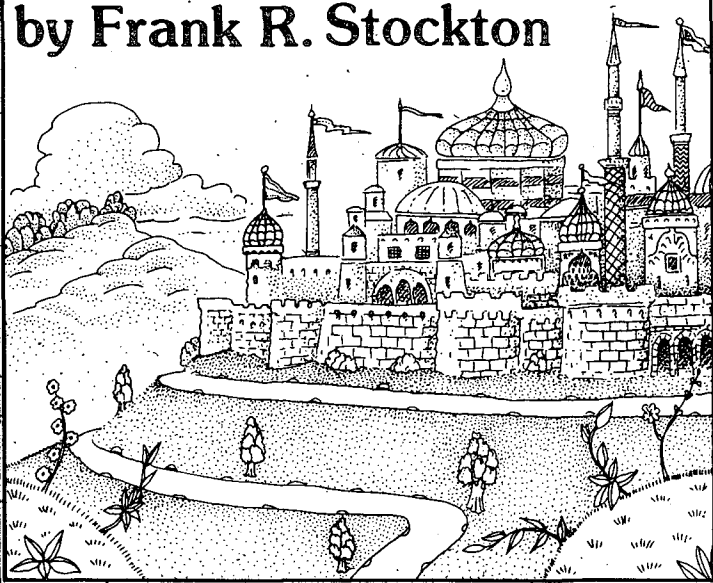
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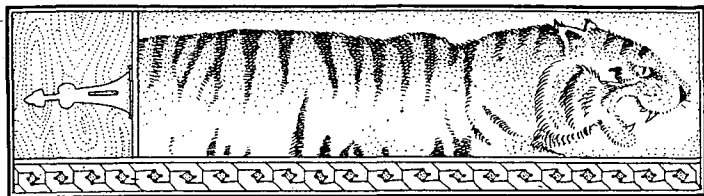
Alice's brother was the victim.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Lady or the Tiger? and The Discourager of Hesitancy

(A Continuation of "The Lady or the Tiger?")
by Frank R. Stockton





In the very olden time, there lived a semi-barbaric king, whose ideas, though somewhat polished and sharpened by the progressiveness of distant Latin neighbors, were still large, florid, and untrammelled, as became the half of him which was barbaric. He was a man of exuberant fancy, and, withal, of an authority so irresistible that, at his will, he turned his varied fancies into facts. He was greatly given to self-communing, and when he and himself agreed upon anything, the thing was done. When every member of his domestic and political systems moved smoothly in its appointed course, his nature was bland and genial; but whenever there was a little hitch, and some of his orbs got out of their orbits, he was blander and more genial still, for nothing pleased him so much as to make the crooked straight, and crush down uneven places.

Among the borrowed notions by which his barbarism had become semified was that of the public arena, in which, by exhibitions of manly and beastly valor, the minds of his subjects were refined and cultured.

But even here the exuberant and barbaric fancy asserted itself. The arena of the king was built, not to give the people an opportunity of hearing the rhapsodies of dying gladiators, nor to enable them to view the inevitable conclusion of a conflict between religious opinions and hungry jaws, but for purposes far better adapted to widen and develop the mental energies of the people. This vast amphitheater, with its encircling galleries, its mysterious vaults, and its unseen passages, was an agent of poetic justice, in which crime was punished, or virtue rewarded, by the decrees of an impartial and incorruptible chance.

When a subject was accused of a crime of sufficient importance to interest the king, public notice was given that on an appointed day the fate of the accused person would be decided in the king's arena—a structure which well deserved its name; for, although its form and plan were borrowed from afar, its purpose emanated solely from the brain of this man, who, every barleycorn a king,

knew no tradition to which he owed more allegiance than pleased his fancy, and who engrafted on every adopted form of human thought and action the rich growth of his barbaric idealism.

When all the people had assembled in the galleries, and the king, surrounded by his court, sat high up on his throne of royal state on one side of the arena, he gave a signal, a door beneath him opened, and the accused subject stepped out into the amphitheater. Directly opposite him, on the other side of the enclosed space, were two doors, exactly alike and side by side. It was the duty and privilege of the person on trial to walk directly to these doors and open one of them. He could open either door he pleased. He was subject to no guidance or influence but that of the aforementioned impartial and incorruptible chance. If he opened the one, there came out of it a hungry tiger, the fiercest and most cruel that could be procured, which immediately sprang upon him, and tore him to pieces, as a punishment for his guilt. The moment that the case of the criminal was thus decided, doleful iron bells were clanged, great wails went up from the hired mourners posted on the outer rim of the arena, and the vast audience, with bowed heads and downcast hearts, wended slowly their homeward way, mourning greatly that one so young and fair, or so old and respected, should have merited so dire a fate.

But if the accused person opened the other door, there came forth from it a lady, the most suitable to his years and station that his Majesty could select among his fair subjects; and to this lady he was immediately married, as a reward of his innocence. It mattered not that he might already possess a wife and family, or that his affections might be engaged upon an object of his own selection. The king allowed no such subordinate arrangements to interfere with his great scheme of retribution and reward. The exercises, as in the other instance, took place immediately, and in the arena. Another door opened beneath the king, and a priest, followed by a band of choristers, and dancing maidens blowing joyous airs on golden horns and treading an epithalamic measure, advanced to where the pair stood side by side, and the wedding was promptly and cheerily solemnized. Then the gay brass bells rang forth their merry peals, the people shouted glad hurrahs, and the innocent man, preceded by children strewing flowers on his path, led his bride to his home.

This was the king's semi-barbaric method of administering justice. Its perfect fairness is obvious. The criminal could not know

out of which door would come the lady. He opened either he pleased, without having the slightest idea whether, in the next instant, he was to be devoured or married. On some occasions the tiger came out of one door, and on some out of the other. The decisions of this tribunal were not only fair—they were positively determinate. The accused person was instantly punished if he found himself guilty, and if innocent he was rewarded on the spot, whether he liked it or not. There was no escape from the judgments of the king's arena.

The institution was a very popular one. When the people gathered together on one of the great trial days, they never knew whether they were to witness a bloody slaughter or a hilarious wedding. This element of uncertainty lent an interest to the occasion which it could not otherwise have attained. Thus the masses were entertained and pleased, and the thinking part of the community could bring no charge of unfairness against this plan; for did not the accused person have the whole matter in his own hands?

This semi-barbaric king had a daughter as blooming as his most florid fancies, and with a soul as fervent and imperious as his own. As is usual in such cases, she was the apple of his eye, and was loved by him above all humanity. Among his courtiers was a young man of that fineness of blood and lowliness of station common to the conventional heroes of romance who love royal maidens. This royal maiden was well satisfied with her lover, for he was handsome and brave to a degree unsurpassed in all this kingdom and she loved him with an ardor that had enough of barbarism in it to make it exceedingly warm and strong. This love affair moved on happily for many months, until, one day, the king happened to discover its existence. He did not hesitate nor waver in regard to his duty in the premises. The youth was immediately cast into prison, and a day was appointed for his trial in the king's arena. This, of course, was an especially important occasion, and his Majesty, as well as all the people, was greatly interested in the workings and development of this trial. Never before had such a case occurred—never before had a subject dared to love the daughter of a king. In after years such things became commonplace enough, but then they were, in no slight degree, novel and startling.

The tiger cages of the kingdom were searched for the most savage and relentless beasts, from which the fiercest monster might be selected for the arena, and the ranks of maiden youth and beauty throughout the land were carefully surveyed by competent judges, in order that the young man might have a fitting bride in case fate

did not determine for him a different destiny. Of course, everybody knew that the deed with which the accused was charged had been done. He had loved the princess, and neither he, she, nor anyone else thought of denying the fact. But the king would not think of allowing any fact of this kind to interfere with the workings of the tribunal, in which he took such great delight and satisfaction. No matter how the affair turned out, the youth would be disposed of, and the king would take an æsthetic pleasure in watching the course of events which would determine whether or not the young man had done wrong in allowing himself to love the princess.

The appointed day arrived. From far and near the people gathered, and thronged the great galleries of the arena, while crowds, unable to gain admittance, massed themselves against its outside walls. The king and his court were in their places, opposite the twin doors—those fateful portals, so terrible in their similarity!

All was ready. The signal was given. A door beneath the royal party opened, and the lover of the princess walked into the arena. Tall, beautiful, fair, his appearance was greeted with a low hum of admiration and anxiety. Half the audience had not known so grand a youth had lived among them. No wonder the princess loved him! What a terrible thing for him to be there!

As the youth advanced into the arena, he turned, as the custom was, to bow to the king. But he did not think at all of that royal personage; his eyes were fixed upon the princess, who sat to the right of her father. Had it not been for the moiety of barbarism in her nature, it is probable that lady would not have been there. But her intense and fervid soul would not allow her to be absent on an occasion in which she was so terribly interested. From the moment that the decree had gone forth that her lover should decide his fate in the king's arena, she had thought of nothing, night or day, but this great event and the various subjects connected with it. Possessed of more power, influence, and force of character than anyone who had ever before been interested in such a case, she had done what no other person had done—she had possessed herself of the secret of the doors. She knew in which of the two rooms behind those doors stood the cage of the tiger, with its open front, and in which waited the lady. Through these thick doors, heavily curtained with skins on the inside, it was impossible that any noise or suggestion should come from within to the person who should approach to raise the latch of one of them. But gold, and the power of a woman's will, had brought the secret to the princess.

Not only did she know in which room stood the lady, ready to emerge, all blushing and radiant, should her door be opened, but she knew who the lady was. It was one of the fairest and loveliest of the damsels of the court who had been selected as the reward of the accused youth, should he be proved innocent of the crime of aspiring to one so far above him; and the princess hated her. Often had she seen, or imagined that she had seen, this fair creature throwing glances of admiration upon the person of her lover, and sometimes she thought these glances were perceived and even returned. Now and then she had seen them talking together. It was but for a moment or two, but much can be said in a brief space. It may have been on most unimportant topics, but how could she know that? The girl was lovely, but she had dared to raise her eyes to the loved one of the princess, and with all the intensity of the savage blood transmitted to her through long lines of wholly barbaric ancestors, she hated the woman who blushed and trembled behind that silent door.

When her lover turned and looked at her, and his eye met hers as she sat there paler and whiter than anyone in the vast ocean of anxious faces about her, he saw, by that power of quick perception which is given to those whose souls are one, that she knew behind which door crouched the tiger, and behind which stood the lady. He had expected her to know it. He understood her nature, and his soul was assured that she would never rest until she had made plain to herself this thing, hidden to all other lookers-on, even to the king. The only hope for the youth in which there was any element of certainty was based upon the success of the princess in discovering this mystery, and the moment he looked upon her, he saw she had succeeded.

Then it was that his quick and anxious glance asked the question, "Which?" It was as plain to her as if he shouted it from where he stood. There was not an instant to be lost. The question was asked in a flash; it must be answered in another.

Her right arm lay on the cushioned parapet before her. She raised her hand, and made a slight, quick movement toward the right. No one but her lover saw her. Every eye but his was fixed on the man in the arena.

He turned, and with a firm and rapid step he walked across the empty space. Every heart stopped beating, every breath was held, every eye was fixed immovably upon that man. Without the slightest hesitation, he went to the door on the right, and opened it.

Now, the point of the story is this: Did the tiger come out of that door, or did the lady?

The more we reflect upon this question, the harder it is to answer. It involves a study of the human heart which leads us through devious mazes of passion, out of which it is difficult to find our way. Think of it, fair reader, not as if the decision of the question depended upon yourself, but upon that hot-blooded, semi-barbaric princess, her soul at a white heat beneath the combined fires of despair and jealousy. She had lost him, but who should have him?

How often, in her waking hours and in her dreams, had she started in wild horror and covered her face with her hands as she thought of her lover opening the door on the other side of which waited the cruel fangs of the tiger!

But how much oftener had she seen him at the other door! How in her grievous reveries had she gnashed her teeth and torn her hair when she saw his start of rapturous delight as he opened the door of the lady! How her soul had burned in agony when she had seen him rush to meet that woman, with her flushing cheek and sparkling eye of triumph; when she had seen him lead her forth, his whole frame kindled with the joy of recovered life; when she had heard the glad shouts from the multitude, and the wild ringing of the happy bells; when she had seen the priest, with his joyous followers, advance to the couple, and make them man and wife before her very eyes; and when she had seen them walk away together upon their path of flowers, followed by the tremendous shouts of the hilarious multitude, in which her one despairing shriek was lost and drowned!

Would it not be better for him to die at once, and go to wait for her in the blessed regions of semi-barbaric futurity?

And yet, that awful tiger, those shrieks, that blood!

Her decision had been indicated in an instant, but it had been made after days and nights of anguished deliberation. She had known she would be asked, she had decided what she would answer, and, without the slightest hesitation, she had moved her hand to the right.

The question of her decision is one not to be lightly considered, and it is not for me to presume to set up myself as the one person able to answer it. So I leave it with all of you: Which came out of the opened door—the lady or the tiger?





It was nearly a year after the occurrence of that event in the arena of the semi-barbaric king, known as the incident of the lady or the tiger, that there came to the palace of the monarch a deputation of five strangers from a far country. These men, of venerable and dignified aspect and demeanor, were received by a high officer of the court, and to him they made known their errand.

"Most noble officer," said the speaker of the deputation, "it so happened that one of our countrymen was present here, in your capital city, on that momentous occasion when a young man who had dared to aspire to the hand of your king's daughter had been placed in the arena, in the midst of the assembled multitude, and ordered to open one of two doors, not knowing whether a ferocious tiger would spring out upon him or a beauteous lady would advance, ready to become his bride. Our fellow-citizen who was then present was a man of supersensitive feelings, and at the moment when the youth was about to open the door he was so fearful lest he should behold a horrible spectacle that his nerves failed him, and he fled precipitately from the arena and, mounting his camel, rode homeward as fast as he could go.

"We were all very much interested in the story which our countryman told us, and we were extremely sorry that he did not wait to see the end of the affair. We hoped, however, that in a few weeks some traveler from your city would come among us and bring us further news, but up to the day when we left our country no such traveler had arrived. At last it was determined that the only thing to be done was to send a deputation to this country, and to ask the question: 'Which came out of the open door, the lady or the tiger?'"

When the high officer had heard the mission of this most respectable deputation, he led the five strangers into an inner room, where they were seated upon soft cushions, and where he ordered

coffee, pipes, sherbet, and other semi-barbaric refreshments to be served to them. Then, taking his seat before them, he thus addressed the visitors:

"Most noble strangers, before answering the question you have come so far to ask, I will relate to you an incident which occurred not very long after that to which you have referred. It is well known in all regions hereabout that our great king is very fond of the presence of beautiful women about his court. All the ladies in waiting upon the queen and royal family are most lovely maidens, brought here from every part of the kingdom. The fame of this concourse of beauty, unequaled in any other royal court, has spread far and wide, and had it not been for the equally widespread fame of the systems of impetuous justice adopted by our king, many foreigners would doubtless have visited our court.

"But not very long ago there arrived here from a distant land a prince of distinguished appearance and undoubted rank. To such an one, of course, a royal audience was granted, and our king met him very graciously, and begged him to make known the object of his visit. Thereupon the prince informed his Royal Highness that, having heard of the superior beauty of the ladies of his court, he had come to ask permission to make one of them his wife.

"When our king heard this bold announcement, his face reddened, he turned uneasily on his throne, and we were all in dread lest some quick words of furious condemnation should leap from out his quivering lips. But by a mighty effort he controlled himself, and after a moment's silence he turned to the prince and said: 'Your request is granted. Tomorrow at noon you shall wed one of the fairest damsels of our court.' Then turning to his officers, he said: 'Give orders that everything be prepared for a wedding in this palace at high noon tomorrow. Convey this royal prince to suitable apartments. Send to him tailors, bootmakers, hatters, jewelers, armorers, men of every craft whose services he may need. Whatever he asks, provide. And let all be ready for the ceremony tomorrow.'

"'But your Majesty,' exclaimed the prince, 'before we make these preparations, I would like—'

"'Say no more!' roared the king. 'My royal orders have been given, and nothing more is needed to be said. You asked a boon. I granted it, and I will hear no more on the subject. Farewell, my prince, until tomorrow noon.'

"At this the king arose and left the audience chamber, while the

prince was hurried away to the apartments selected for him. Here came to him tailors, hatters, jewelers, and everyone who was needed to fit him out in grand attire for the wedding. But the mind of the prince was much troubled and perplexed.

"I do not understand," he said to his attendants, 'this precipitancy of action. When am I to see the ladies, that I may choose among them? I wish opportunity, not only to gaze upon their forms and faces, but to become acquainted with their relative intellectual development.'

"We can tell you nothing," was the answer. 'What our king thinks right, that will he do. More than this we know not.'

"His Majesty's notions seem to be very peculiar," said the prince, 'and, so far as I can see, they do not at all agree with mine.'

"At that moment an attendant whom the prince had not before noticed came and stood beside him. This was a broad-shouldered man of cheery aspect who carried, its hilt in his right hand and its broad back resting on his broad arm, an enormous scimitar, the upturned edge of which was keen and bright as any razor. Holding this formidable weapon as tenderly as though it had been a sleeping infant, this man drew closer to the prince and bowed.

"Who are you?" exclaimed his Highness, starting back at the sight of the frightful weapon.

"I," said the other, with a courteous smile, 'am the Discourager of Hesitancy. When our king makes known his wishes to anyone, a subject or visitor, whose disposition in some little points may be supposed not wholly to coincide with that of his Majesty, I am appointed to attend him closely, that, should he think of pausing in the path of obedience to the royal will, he may look at me, and proceed.'

"The prince looked at him, and proceeded to be measured for a coat.

"The tailors and shoemakers and hatters worked all night, and the next morning, when everything was ready, and the hour of noon was drawing nigh, the prince again anxiously inquired of his attendants when he might expect to be introduced to the ladies.

"The king will attend to that," they said. 'We know nothing of the matter.'

"Your Highness," said the Discourager of Hesitancy, approaching with a courtly bow, 'will observe the excellent quality of this edge.' And drawing a hair from his head, he dropped it upon the upturned edge of his scimitar, upon which it was cut in two at the moment of touching.

"The prince glanced, and turned upon his heel.

"Now came officers to conduct him to the grand hall of the palace, in which the ceremony was to be performed. Here the prince found the king seated on the throne, with his nobles, his courtiers, and his officers standing about him in magnificent array. The prince was led to a position in front of the king, to whom he made obeisance, and then said:

"Your Majesty, before I proceed further—"

"At this moment an attendant, who had approached with a long scarf of delicate silk, wound it about the lower part of the prince's face so quickly and adroitly that he was obliged to cease speaking. Then, with wonderful dexterity, the rest of the scarf was wound around the prince's head, so that he was completely blindfolded. Thereupon the attendant quickly made openings in the scarf over the mouth and ears, so that the prince might breathe and hear, and fastening the ends of the scarf securely, he retired.

"The first impulse of the prince was to snatch the silken folds from his head and face, but, as he raised his hands to do so, he heard beside him the voice of the Discourager of Hesitancy, who gently whispered: 'I am here, your Highness.' And, with a shudder, the arms of the prince fell down by his side.

"Now before him he heard the voice of a priest, who had begun the marriage service in use in that semi-barbaric country. At his side he could hear a delicate rustle, which seemed to proceed from fabrics of soft silk. Gently putting forth his hand, he felt folds of such silk close beside him. Then came the voice of the priest requesting him to take the hand of the lady by his side; and reaching forth his right hand, the prince received within it another hand, so small, so soft, so delicately fashioned, and so delightful to the touch that a thrill went through his being. Then, as was the custom of the country, the priest first asked the lady would she have this man to be her husband; to which the answer gently came, in the sweetest voice he had ever heard: 'I will.'

"Then ran raptures rampant through the prince's blood. The touch, the tone, enchanted him. All the ladies of that court were beautiful, the Discourager was behind him, and through his parted scarf he boldly answered: 'Yes, I will.'

"Whereupon the priest pronounced them man and wife.

"Now the prince heard a little bustle about him, the long scarf was rapidly unrolled from his head, and he turned, with a start, to gaze upon his bride. To his utter amazement, there was no one there. He stood alone. Unable on the instant to ask a question or

say a word, he gazed blankly about him.

"Then the king arose from his throne, and came down, and took him by the hand.

"Where is my wife?" gasped the prince.

"She is here," said the king, leading him to a curtained doorway at the side of the hall.

"The curtains were drawn aside, and the prince, entering, found himself in a long apartment, near the opposite wall of which stood a line of forty ladies, all dressed in rich attire, and each one apparently more beautiful than the rest.

"Waving his hand toward the line, the king said to the prince: 'There is your bride! Approach, and lead her forth! But remember this: that if you attempt to take away one of the unmarried damsels of our court, your execution shall be instantaneous. Now, delay no longer. Step up and take your bride.'

"The prince, as in a dream, walked slowly along the line of ladies, and then walked slowly back again. Nothing could he see about any one of them to indicate that she was more of a bride than the others. Their dresses were all similar, they all blushed, they all looked up and then looked down. They all had charming little hands. Not one spoke a word. Not one lifted a finger to make a sign. It was evident that the orders given them had been very strict.

"Why this delay?" roared the king. 'If I had been married this day to one so fair as the lady who wedded you, I should not wait one second to claim her.'

"The bewildered prince walked again up and down the line. And this time there was a slight change in the countenances of two of the ladies. One of the fairest gently smiled as he passed her. Another, just as beautiful, slightly frowned.

"Now," said the prince to himself, 'I am sure that it is one of those two ladies whom I have married. But which? One smiled. And would not any woman smile when she saw, in such a case, her husband coming toward her? Then again, on the other hand, would not any woman frown when she saw her husband come toward her and fail to claim her? Would she not knit her lovely brows? Would she not inwardly say, "It is I! Don't you know it? Don't you feel it? Come!" But if this woman had not been married, would she not frown when she saw the man looking at her? Would she not say inwardly, "Don't stop at me! It is the next but one. It is two ladies above. Go on!" Then again, the one who married me did not see my face. Would she not now smile if she thought me

comely? But if I wedded the one who frowned, could she restrain her disapprobation if she did not like me? Smiles invite the approach of true love. A frown is a reproach to a tardy advance. A smile—

"Now, hear me!" loudly cried the king. "In ten seconds, if you do not take the lady we have given you, she who has just been made your bride shall be your widow."

"And, as the last word was uttered, the Discourager of Hesitancy stepped close behind the prince and whispered: 'I am here!'"

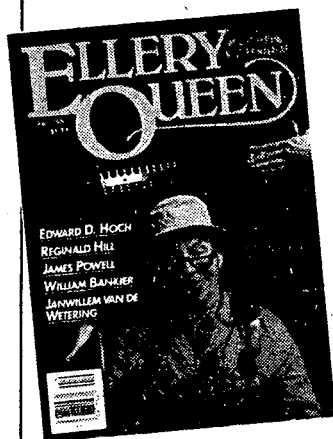
"Now the prince could not hesitate an instant; he stepped forward and took one of the two ladies by the hand."

"Loud rang the bells, loud cheered the people, and the king came forward to congratulate the prince. He had taken his lawful bride."

"Now, then," said the high officer to the deputation of five strangers from a far country, "when you can decide among yourselves which lady the prince chose, the one who smiled or the one who frowned, then will I tell you which came out of the opened door, the lady or the tiger!"

At the latest accounts the five strangers had not yet decided.

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S.F.X. DEAN

Several years ago, Professor Neil Kelly debuted as the protagonist in a highly praised mystery novel titled *By Frequent Anguish*. There have been major developments since then. S.F.X. Dean has been revealed to be Francis Smith who, like his fictional hero, is a teacher at a New England college. In addition to garnering excellent reviews, *By Frequent Anguish* was subsequently nominated for both the Mystery Writers of America Edgar award and the British Silver Dagger Award. Perhaps even more important to his loyal readers, Dean followed up the first book with three more: *Such Pretty Toys*, *Ceremony of Innocence*, and *It Can't Be My Grave*. (A fifth title, *Death and*

the Mad Heroine, will be published soon.) Each book features Kelly and each is worthy of your attention.

Neil Kelly narrates his own tales, and he does so with wit, an acute intelligence, and the kind of open honesty that ranks him with the true seekers, the authentic scholars. He is middle-aged, a widower; he is also, in the first novel, appalled to find himself falling in love with a student. More surprising to Neil is the fact that Pru, the beautiful daughter of two very old friends, is the one initiating the relationship. Here we see Neil in a role in which he will, time and time again, be cast: the loner who—unlike the standard private eye of tough-guy fiction—morally cannot re-

main aloof when events storm around him.

And Neil Kelly's life will not remain untroubled during the course of the first book, and the three that follow. Pru's murder, and Neil's sad commission to investigate, privately (a request made by her parents), is at the heart of *By Frequent Anguish*. Dean faces Kelly's grief head-on, and the result is a richness of character rarely found in mystery novels. Along the way the reader is treated to an insider's view of academia, the delightful details that make the story so authentic: the "types" one finds on every teaching staff, and the rabble-rousing student minority, for instance; the crazy ways of the bureaucracy; the "in" jokes on campus; the silly little things that become hidebound rituals.

Life gets no easier for Professor Kelly in *Such Pretty Toys*, which opens with the shocking news that a bomb has killed Pru's father and blinded her mother. Prepared to depart on a much-needed sabbatical, Neil instead answers the summons of his old friend. Although the tragedy does not initially affect him as much as the murder of his fiancée, it gradually appears that Kelly may have been, in some way, the catalyst of this crime. It's a strong plot, and a sophisticated treatment.

Ceremony of Innocence should,

at last, find Kelly at peace. He finally arrives in England to begin his long vacation. There he starts his research on John Donne, and meets up with two men—one British, one Chinese—who shared Kelly's boyhood in pre-Revolutionary China. But the idyll is horribly shattered by a brutally violent act, and Kelly is again pulled into a net of crime. There is more "action" in this novel, of the death-defying sort, that is. There is also background on China, and even Donne. Above all, there is the very sympathetic and companionable Kelly.

It Can't Be My Grave is the latest, and it's a winner, too. Set in London, where Kelly is supposed to be helping his British publisher promote his book on Donne, this novel has a cosmopolitan feel to it that the others lack. The cast of characters is larger and more colorful: a self-made millionaire, a well-known acting couple, a strong-minded book editor, and others. The worlds of theater and publishing provide backdrops to a curious story of greed, obsession, and murder. Neil's personal feelings are not as inextricably bound up with this case as with the earlier ones; and besides, he's proving himself to be quite the detective. But although he's not really mourning the victim here, he is no less sensitive, no less cu-

rious, no less human for it. This last book; like its predecessors, makes one yearn for the next.

(S.F.X. Dean mysteries are published in hardcover by Walker and Company.)

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Martha Grimes fans will be thrilled to learn that **Jerusalem Inn**, her latest Inspector Jury novel, is as delightful as the preceding four in the series. (See the profile on the author in this column in last November's AHMM.) Five days before Christmas, Jury has a chance meeting with a woman in a cemetery, and they make a date. On the next day she's dead, and he begins an investigation that soon leads him to a snowbound Gothic mansion where, coincidentally, his friend Melrose Plant is dying of boredom as a houseguest. Grimes again wields her magic brush to paint a picture of holiday murder in the British countryside, demonstrating a deft touch with her characters and an uncanny feel for ambiance. Fans may find this one somewhat more bittersweet than the earlier novels, but perhaps it's just a sign of a maturing author. Whatever, the result is a pleasure to savor. (Little, Brown, \$15.95, 299 pp.)

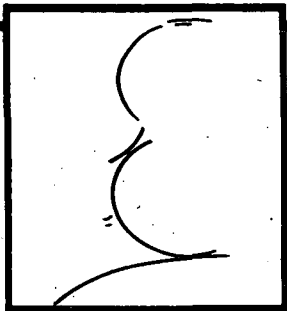
Another past profile subject, Elizabeth Lemarchand, has a new entry as well. **The Wheel Turns** (Walker and Company, \$12.95, 223 pp.) brings back Inspector Tom Pollard and his partner to sort out a byzantine tangle of hit-and-run, blackmail, and suspected murder. As always, Lemarchand conjures up a convincing picture of contemporary life in London's suburban villages.

Catherine Aird's newest, featuring Detective Inspector C.D. Sloan, is **Harm's Way** (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95, 180 pp.). This is Aird's eleventh book in the series, and many of you are probably already old friends and fans, for these are sure-footed mysteries in the old-school sense: a British countryside background, colorful rural characters, a puzzling plot, and a quietly tenacious detective.

Famous Trials, edited by John Mortimer, is a selection of write-ups of British murder cases culled from The Penguin Famous Trials series, an anthology originally published in 1941. This volume, with entries selected by the creator of "Rumpole of the Bailey," therefore includes versions of the most celebrated murders, such as those committed by Dr. Crippen and Madeleine Smith. I thought the old fashioned narrative style and very dated British expressions enhanced the tales, but some might find the going a bit tedious. (Penguin Books, \$5.95, 376 pp.)

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



The Mean Season is a harder, sparer version of *The Heat of the Summer*, John Katzenbach's 1982 novel about a reporter who gets personally involved in the big story of a serial murderer. The stripped-down plot puts Malcolm Anderson of the *Miami Journal* (author Katzenbach was a crime reporter on the *Miami Herald*) in a quandary. Anderson wants to resign from his job and take his girlfriend, the beautiful Mariel Hemingway, to Colorado to run a small-town weekly. But after covering a last, apparently routine murder, he receives a call from the killer revealing that there is to be a string of murders, and that the killer has selected Anderson as his conduit to the public. Naturally Anderson goes on with the story, and naturally his girlfriend is annoyed—especially as she has

just turned in her resignation as a grade school teacher. The "numbers killer" strikes repeatedly, and after each murder he gets in touch with Anderson.

Anderson himself now becomes famous, and can anticipate a Pulitzer prize. In the novel, he worries over his dilemma at some length: has he become interested in having the murders continue; has he grown dependent on the murderer, fascinated by and even drawn to him? In the movie these questions take the form of somewhat shrewish accusations by Mariel Hemingway, whose awkward place in the novel as the romantic interest is made all too evident on screen.

In the meantime, the killer has been stalking Anderson just as the serial murderer did last year with Clint Eastwood in *Tightrope*. Suddenly Anderson

is put in the desperate position of having to solve the murders himself. Now the action picks up, leaving the book far behind. Anderson rushes to save his girlfriend from the killer, and finds himself in a spectacular chase on air boats in the Everglades. The surprise ending is more chilling than anything in the book, and more profound as well. It all has to do with the so called "mean season" in Florida—the steamy heat of July and August, months also dangerous for their hurricanes. Katzenbach's novel paralleled the threat from nature with the community's fear of the killer. But the movie is able to bring together visually the howling of the weather with the terror of night, and to have them both burst right through the door into the characters' lives and the audience's imagination.

Mystery readers who missed the book the first time around may be interested in picking it up in its latest paperback printing, which uses the movie's title, *The Mean Season* (Ballantine, \$3.95.) Such readers will find interestingly different settings for each of the murders, along with detailed accounts of how they were committed. (Wisely, the moviemakers decided not to put these scenes on screen, where they would be far more horrific than they are in print.) Readers

will find, too, that the murderer is provided with a motive—one that has something to do with an obscure guilt over the Vietnam war.



Kurt Russell as the reporter and Mariel Hemingway as his girlfriend in *The Mean Season*.

Last of all, the reader will come to admire the movie's nice tying up of all the loose ends at the finale, and at the same time to appreciate the absence of resolution in the book. For the murderer and his motives, though more deeply plumbed in print, are left something of a mystery. As for Anderson's future with his job and his girlfriend, these are not nearly so pleasantly settled as such matters usually are in Hollywood. His psyche, his profession, and his love life have all been genuinely darkened by his experience. In print, his mean season, like the reader's, is calculated to linger on for a while in the mind.

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THE STORY THAT WON

Clyde H. Smith



The January Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California. Honorable mentions go to B. Newton of Saline, Michigan; E. W. Simonsen of St. Francis, Wisconsin; Shirley Lawrence Steele of Grinnell, Iowa; Shirley J. Mudrick of Greendale, Wisconsin; Lee Baxter of El Centro, California; B. I. Chance of Sublimity, Oregon; Al Zillmer of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Jim Aiello of Sea Cliff, New York; Barbara Fracaro of Baton Rouge, Louisiana; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Amy E. Dean of Littleton, Massachusetts; and Richard Ciciarelli of Phelps, New York.

NO FISH STORY by William F. Smith

I put down the phone and turned to Captain McCauley. "That was Looney Larson."

McCauley raised one eyebrow quizzically. "Yeah? What's he complaining about this time?"

"Bunch of kids romping around and sliding down his hill."

"So what? That's only natural after the first snowfall of the year."

"Well, he says they rolled all of his bagels down the hill, and some of the kids even rode down inside them."

Accustomed to odd reports by Larson, the captain merely said, "Explain, please."

"As you know, Looney is always coming up with weird ideas. Seems he was trying to get into the *Guinness Book of World Records* by baking a large number of giant bagels in tire molds. He's been storing them in three sheds on the hill. The kids got hold of them today and sent them spinning down the hill. Looney says the things are completely ruined now and look like giant frosted doughnuts. He wants us to round up some of the kids so he can file damage claims against their parents."

"That won't be easy. They'll all scatter when they see us coming. How'd they get hold of the blasted things anyway?"

I had to suppress a chuckle for fear McCauley would believe I was laughing at him. "Well, you'll have to admit that Looney was mighty careless. When he put the bagels into those sheds, he forgot to take along any locks."

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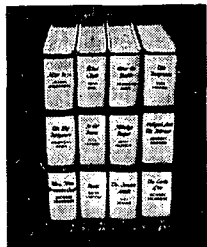
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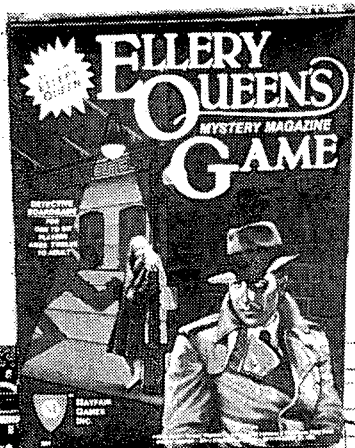
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